
AIR/LIGHT
fall 2020

AIR/LIGHT

Fall 2020

Volume 1, Issue 1

Los Angeles, California

Cover photo by Bart Jaillet

www.airlightmagazine.org
editor@airlightmagazine.org

Air/Light *is an online literary journal published by the English Department at the University of Southern California. We showcase both traditional and innovative works. We are firmly of California and the West Coast — the occupied land of the Tongva in Los Angeles, where we are based, and those of other indigenous peoples of the Americas — but also national, international. We mean to look out expansively from this place rather than to gaze narrowly back at it, to express a West Coast aesthetic, a West Coast sensibility, and direct that lens onto the world.*

Submissions should be made via Submittable: https://airlightmagazine.org/about/submissions/

Contents

Departments

Editor's Note

David L. Ulin

It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.

William Carlos Williams, "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower"

I remember the first novel I ever read. I was seven years old and at the beginning of the second grade. The book was one of Robert Heinlein's novels for young readers; it was set on Mars. I started second grade during the fall of 1968, so this was right around the time the Apollo 7 launch reignited the moon race, which culminated with the Apollo 11 mission the following year.

I'm lying a little when I say that I remember the Heinlein novel, because both its title and its con-

tents have long eluded me. I can still see it, though, still feel it in my hands—a glossy little hardcover with no dust jacket, designed more to resemble a volume for adults than one for kids.

I can also still see myself as I read it early on a Saturday morning, on the tail end of a sleepover, one of (it must have been) my earliest. Or maybe I shouldn't say see but rather recognize, for this is the sort of moment that has repeated itself endlessly throughout my life. A quiet morning (or afternoon or evening), a compelling narrative, the desire to connect while also disconnecting, to sit in the amorphous space between distance and intimacy where literature lives.

What I mean is: I have read and written my passage through this world. Especially now, at a time when we're so broken, so disunited, when the virtues of human decency and opportunity and honesty are once again imperiled, there is nothing that feels more necessary than to experience one another through our words.

I'd be lying once more, I suppose, were I to say this was the genesis of *Air/Light*. But then again, I'd be lying were I to say that it was not. The journal you're now reading, after all, is dedicated to the notion that the more words, the more stories and poems and essays, the more points-of-view and experiences and perspectives that represent themselves, the better off we all will be.

At *Air/Light*, we like literature that takes the gloves off. We like literature that means what it says. And we like literature that plays a little fast

and loose with expectations, with tradition and with hierarchy, that blurs the boundaries not only between genres but also between forms.

As a result, what you'll find in our first issue, both now and over the course of the fall, are voices: a variety of work in a variety of forms and media, all of it committed and engaged. You'll find private narratives and public narratives, although, as they ever have, these can't help but overlap. You'll find voices that speak to, or out of, our current predicament, that speak with the sense that we are living at the end of something, and perhaps at the beginning of something else.

Most of all, you'll find voices that matter, that are insistent, that say what needs to be said. Think of the journal, then, as a chorus.

Or, maybe, as a gathering place.

It's been a long process putting *Air/Light* together: a collaboration in every sense of the word. We are delighted to share with you these voices, and everything they have to say.

We look forward to the conversation that we will have together: the ongoing human one about who and where we are.

So, welcome. We're grateful you have joined us. We are glad you're here.

Little Earthquakes

Vickie Vértiz

TODAY

The Big One still has not hit California. It's the earthquake we're all waiting for. It'll be at least an 8.0 on the Richter scale. I wish it was chisme, but I can tell you we believe it. Some say it'll be so strong that we'll fall into the ocean. But it hasn't happened.

Sometimes, I catch myself wondering if that roll I felt under my feet is the beginning of the end. I look up from my computer and notice how my fear nearly wishes the Big One into life. I go back to writing, that other job that doesn't end. I hope the Big One is a lie—a way to scare ourselves into being ready for the worst. Maybe the worst has already happened. I can't tell you what that is yet.

BACK THEN

The Earth cracks. Windows rattle and dishes crash on the floor. Amá, two little brothers, and I hide under our kitchen table. The dark green linoleum rumbles so hard Amá holds the table legs so it won't move away. I picture tall sheets of glass falling at the company where Dad works as he and his coworkers run for cover. If I keep my hands on the floor, I'll be ready for the aftershocks. They won't surprise me. I promise God that if we live through this, I'll be good and obey Amá no matter what.

Amá's best friend knows everything. Doña Marta says Nostradamus predicted that we'd have the Big One any day now. After we clean up broken dishes and Dad calls to say he is okay, we walk to her house a block away so we won't be alone.

"No te preocupes," Doña Marta says. She sees my crumpled face because I'm going to cry like a baby. "We'll be ready. California won't sink into the ocean."

The ocean? That makes my panza twist. The earthquake won't be the worst part. Our town is so crowded; everyone's tiny houses and little yards are right next to each other, so many beds shoved into one bedroom, two bunk beds and a queen. I can see the end: us standing on our wobbly house, my brothers and Amá, Dad at work, and me watching the ocean swallow the other houses, the water inching closer.

For two weeks after the Whittier Narrows earthquake, I sit at the living room window and listen. Doña Marta says there is a sound, a zumbido outside, when an earthquake is coming. I hear it. I ignore the noise cars make on the freeway nearby. The zumbido buzzes like a big light bulb someone forgot to turn off. I wonder when we'll be crushed. Doña Marta didn't say. I bite my nails and sit on the red plastic couch and watch TV. I can't lean out the window because then I'd be leaning into the alley.

"Get away from there and close the window," says Amá. "You're going to get sick." Dad eats dinner with her at the kitchen table.

"And close the curtain so the dust won't come in," he says.

No more listening. I'll just have to wait.

ONE TIME

I hate riding this dumb bike that doesn't work.

"Nomás súbete," Dad says, kind of sounding mad. "Get back on the bike. I'll push you."

He took off the training wheels and I'm supposed to ride alone. I jump on and fall again.

"I told you," I say. "I can't." He adjusts his blue baseball cap.

"Bullshit." He's holding my yellow BMX by the seat so I can get on. "Fine," I say, but inside I think he's stupid. I get on. We go in circles around the cement yard before the neighbors come home and park their cars. I steer around oil puddles. Dad lets go and watches.

"Hey!" My mouth is open, but there's no sound.

Ha! I didn't fall.

"I told you," he says, smiling. I don't hate him for a whole hour.

THEN

It's only happened once.

My college counselor congratulates me that day for getting into Brown. When I poke my head between the chain-linked fences that protect our house from bad guys, Amá is out front. I can barely see because the sugar cane is so tall. She and Doña Marta are talking. Amá is wearing a dress she made, a blue paisley muumuu with straps. She is showing Marta something on her upper arm.

"Aquí me pegó el maldito viejo," she spits. A ripe plum glows on her shoulder. I grip my red backpack. "And then he shoved me on the bed, and then he told me I was his wife, and then …" And then, and then, and then. I still can't repeat what she said because the ground will devour me. I offer the words into the ground instead.

"I hit him back," she continues. I don't speak. Maybe Doña Marta puts down her glass of aguardiente and hugs me. Maybe I cry. Maybe I stand there like a good girl, eating the stories. One more about how he tried to kill her on the freeway. Once. My brothers might be on the floor of the living room watching the Ninja Turtles. The youngest is nine, the next youngest thirteen. Maybe they aren't home. I don't know if they remember. The next

youngest probably does. He cares for them now that they're seventy-three and still together.

"He just wants you to listen." My next youngest brother says this when I complain about Dad's endless cuentos about boxers and world events. When I complain about their bickering, he says, "Things aren't that bad anymore. Not like it used to be." I choke at what I missed when I left for college. I wonder what my brother is afraid of.

He stuffs those earthquakes in his heart.

AFTER

I fill out temporary restraining orders at the Pomona Courthouse; it's my job after college. I am so good it takes me less than fifteen minutes per person. When Dad punched Amá, she said she was going to leave him.

"He'll be sorry," she said. She didn't ask me for help. A neighbor's daughter filled out a TRO. At work, I see women return for more orders. I live at home and one night I ask Amá why she didn't leave. A cheater, cheapskate, and grocero who called her vieja pendeja like it was her name.

"Where was I going to go with three kids, without a job or money?"

I have no answer. I don't have one for clients either. I fill out TROs in perfect English and hope for the best. I don't worry about earthquakes at work. I worry about men who threaten to shoot us if we help their wives.

FAULT LINE

Visiting family in Hidalgo, I ask too many questions. Grandpa Juan died from diabetes complications in 1977. His toe got infected and gangrene took his foot and leg. But in 1969, he was so strong he tamed wild horses. This is the year we discuss.

At the kitchen table, I ask my tias and my mom, "Was Grandpa ever angry?" My brothers watch TV with our cousins. Movie guns go off in the next room.

"He was canijo," says my godmother. "Marina, remember how he dragged Mom across the kitchen floor by her braids?"

They won't say why he was mad and Amá doesn't know; she was in Los Angeles when it happened.

"It was a terrible time," says Tía Marina. "I don't want to remember." She gets up to warm milk on the stove. Amá folds a napkin into a fan.

"But he was a good man, mija," says Amá. "He loved us the best he could." My godmother looks at the ceiling and wipes her eyes. From the stove, Marina says, "It only happened a couple of times. He wasn't an abuser." The milk foams over. Marina brings the nata she's skimmed from the milk to spread over our toasted bolillos. My younger brother walks in.

"What are you talking about in here? You look sad." He rubs Amá's shoulders and gets no answer.

*

Tinkering near his shitty Toyota, Dad tells me about Las Lajas, "the jewels," the bare farm he grew up on. The hills were anything but rich. He twists his mustache at the ends. He looks at his tools and occasionally at me.

"My grandparents raised me." Humble people with down-turned mouths who must have loved him, though I've only seen them in photographs. At fifteen, Dad went to Tecate to stay with them and his grandmother's new beau. One night, the boyfriend slapped her.

"He was pedo," Dad says. That's what happens, he shrugs. Dad jumped on him so fast, that cabrón didn't see it coming. The boyfriend never returned. Dad left soon after.

"He learned his lesson." This makes me want to learn how to fight.

TODAY

When I leave my parents' house, Amá blesses me, says, "Watch out." Look out for viejos and crazies. When I walk alone, I put on my "don't fuck with me" face. If I'm getting in a car, Dad wants me to look around and inside, listen for footsteps. Trucha.

In self-defense classes, I'm encouraged to "be aware." What these warnings mean is that there's a rapist in the car, on the way to school, on the way home, everywhere. Statistically, people are more likely to be raped by someone they know, not some ghoul around the corner. It's like waiting for the Big One: it's coming—I just don't know when.

If I forget to be afraid, the Big One will hit without me. What breaks my heart is that it hit my family years ago. For all that worry, I wasn't even home.

*

I need a car to get to my friend's wedding. Staying with my family in southeast Los Angeles, there's no life without a car. I ask Dad to borrow his rickety minivan. He just sucks his teeth.

"I don't know, Chata. It's not working too well." He walks out of the house. I should've rented a car.

At six o'clock, I tell him.

"I have to go. Where are your keys?"

"Fine," he sighs loudly. "Let me show you how to turn it on."

"I know how to turn on the car, Dad."

"Not this one."

I humor him. He pushes a few buttons and says this is the ignition. I repeat what he does. I can only change gears if I step on the brake. Isn't that the way it is for all cars? I don't make sense of it. Trying to find logic in Dad's movidas has never helped me. He shows me how to turn on the lights. He wants to make sure I get home safe.

"Okay, Apá," I say. "Thank you." By the way he stands next to the door, I can tell he's unconvinced. "I'll fill up the tank."

He nods and, though he doesn't smile, I know he's pleased.

He lets me go.

The Undercurrent

Lilliam Rivera

We were a house of women first. My older sister Gina, Mami, and me. Men never stayed in our cramped apartment on 183rd Street in the Bronx. Not the man who hung out in front of the bodega, the one I was told was my Papi, or my sister's father, who apparently lived in Jersey somewhere, and that was fine. We had each other, and it seemed enough until Gina celebrated her fifteenth birthday by running away with Ray from down the block. It didn't matter to me. Gina and I were never tight. The seven-year difference between us was like a chasm that couldn't be breached. She seemed so desperate to break our triangle. Mami couldn't stop her no matter how hard she tried. There were curfews and punishments, but Gina always had her eyes glued to the door until it was left foolishly ajar.

When Gina left, Mami broke down. She couldn't function. She stopped going to work as a nursing assistant. Sadness engulfed her. No matter what

I did—sing, make funny faces, give novela breakdowns—I couldn't snap her out of it.

Mami took what little money we had and fled back to the island. I was left at my Titi Luz's house. Every Sunday, Mami called to tell me how hot it was on the island and that she would be home soon.

"Te quiero," she said before hanging up. She sounded so happy. I wondered how happiness could be found so far away from me.

Months later, Mami returned with a deep tan and a protruding belly. She didn't speak of her island days. Never once mentioned the name of the father. It would take years before she could finally recount how she spent her days, and nights, but by then Mami would be unable to differentiate dreams from reality.

"Se parece como un angel!" the neighborhood Mamis exclaimed at my newborn brother.

At first, everyone praised the baby boy with piercing brown eyes and brown curly hair. They swore he was a gift from the gods, the miracle Mami needed to forget how lonely she was. What I saw was a wrinkled old thing, but he brought Mami back to me. It was enough of a sign for me to love him fiercely. He was a blessing. I believed it. I still do.

Everyone called him Javy and not his real name, Javier. The name Javier was meant for his future self, the one that was certain to work in construction, have a wife and a couple of kids, a side chick when he craved reassurances. He would never get the chance to grow into his name.

Maybe Javy latched onto her breast too harshly, leaving Mami bruised. Maybe Javy's tiny fists pounded on her chest and on mine when I tried to calm him down. The only thing that pacified him were warm baths in the kitchen sink.

"He's a water baby," Mami said. We laughed when his chubby fingers caressed the water. He was so gentle. Hours spent in the sink. Unlike my mother's hand, Javy's skin never bunched up like craters no matter how long he stayed submerged.

When he was two years old, Mami and I packed his bathtub toys and boarded the crowded Bx12 to Orchard Beach. Everyone crammed in that bus with their beach chairs and radios. A man got up and offered Mami a seat, but his smile made him seem as if he wanted more than just a thank you. Javy's face turned red when the man reached over to get a closer look at him. Javy didn't stop screaming, not when we got off the bus, not even when we were walking toward the ocean. Javy stopped only when Mami gently dipped his toes in.

"See?" Mami said. "He was meant for the water."

Dueling boomboxes competed for soundtrack domination. Bachatas and rap songs. I made friends with a girl missing her two front teeth. We built a sand castle while our backs burned. Mami and Javy never left the water. With the sunset, Mami whispered promises of returning while Javy's shrieks increased with each step we took toward the bus stop. Finally, from sheer exhaustion, he rested against her chest.

After that, we went every weekend to the beach. When it got cold, Mami bundled us up. As I got older, I stopped going with them. When Javy wasn't near the ocean, he became unrecognizable.

It was a slow build. At three, he rammed a toy truck into the head of a cousin. At four, he overturned a pot of boiling water onto the cat. At five, he found the knives.

Mami swore the only way to get rid of the demons driving my baby brother was to submerge him in freezing water.

"Ayudame," she said, directing me to take hold of him again. Javy kicked and screamed as we dragged him across the hallway to the small bathroom. His eyes were red with fury. I could make out the Spanish curses he yelled, the motherfuckers too, but there were words I swore he made up right on the spot as if he were speaking another language.

"Calm down, Javy!" I screamed.

The water was frigid and Javy howled like an animal when we placed him in the tub, clothes and all. Mami recited the rosary—the "Ave Marias," the "Ten Piedads"—while our next-door neighbors banged on the walls. The neighbors never called Child Services on us although they always threatened to do so. They'd witnessed Javy acting out in public. They knew what my mom was up against.

Javy looked possessed but not like in the movies. It was something more animalistic. His face would contort. He would appear sinister and old. Mami never seemed to notice his transformation, or maybe she ignored it.

Eventually, the howling stopped. The only noise that remained was the pelting of the cold water from the running faucet. I can still see him there, curled in the bottom of the tub. His skinny arms wrapped around his knees. His Yankees t-shirt pressed against his skin to reveal tiny ridges from his ribs.

"Mami?" he said with the shyness of any five-year-old, confused as to where he was or how he got there.

I handed Mami the large towel and she wrapped his thin frame in it. With another, she dried his hair. Javy's breath returned to normal. His face no longer full of rage. His brown eyes searched for understanding.

"Clean the bathroom," Mami said as she lifted him up.

It was on me to wipe down the puddles of water that spilled from the tub. It was also on me to clean up the mess that had started the attack in the kitchen. I got down on my knees and soaked up the bathroom floor with paper towels. In the quiet, I tried to piece together what provoked him. Was it the wrong answer to a question or a song he hated? Did we do something different this time? There was never a pattern.

"It's okay, Javy. Mami's got you."

The scratches Javy left on my arms are permanent. I can still trace them like a map that leads to each of his outbursts. The time he pushed a cousin down a flight of stairs. The time he bit a kid's leg for no reason. I was always nearby, dragging him away

and in the process suffering from it. Each scar tied me to him forever.

There were nights when Javy would sneak into my bed. The tips of his tiny brown hands were always cold. He smelled of salt. When I caressed his cheeks, I felt a sensation of otherness. I can still feel it deep inside me.

"I love you." I whispered this in his ear. It felt as if I was confessing to him, as if this was our little secret. I could look past the fears of the others and protect him. Mami wasn't capable, but I was.

"Can we go to the beach tomorrow?" he asked over and over. "I need to go. They're waiting."

I joked and told him that the seaweed and dirty diapers floating by would still be there. I tried to tickle him, but he never laughed.

"If you don't take me, I will hurt everyone." He said this with an even, calm voice. Not a threat. A fact.

"Why?" I asked.

He answered with a smile.

While he dreamed, his body jerked as if he were searching for something. What was he searching for?

*

Mami is weak now. The nurses work hard to make her comfortable. There are days when she doesn't recognize me. There are other days when she remembers everything as if it just happened.

"Get the bath ready for Javy." Mami grips my wrist tightly.

"Javier is no longer with us. Remember?" I say, handing her a glass of water to sip.

She slaps the glass from my hand. Her eyes go wild. Mami is going back in time and recalling the day, fifteen years ago.

"It was your fault! It was your fault!"

Mami screams until the nurse returns with a pill to calm her. This is a routine that occurs every time I visit. The guilt tears me up, jolts me out of my bed, leaving my lovers wondering who the fuck is Javier. This will never end. Mami's accusations are just part of our castigo, our punishment.

My sister never visits. She came to Javier's service but didn't stay long. She lives upstate somewhere. Sometimes she sends money to take care of Mami. Not always.

The nurse brings Mami dinner and I sit to feed her.

"Mami, you have to eat a little. Keep your strength up." She listens and takes a couple of bites. Her wrists are so dainty, not like when they held back Javier's hand from slicing her with the knife. When she is done eating, I sit behind her on the bed and brush her long white hair. This is when she feels young again. This is when she usually recounts her days on the island.

"Fue la Noche de San Juan. Everyone was out dancing on the beach. It was mesmerizing. I had a beautiful dress, one I borrowed from my sister. It was the color of the flamboyan. No one could say a thing to me. I was my own person. You understand?"

"Yes, Mami."

"When you have children, you forget who you are. Back on the island, I was a woman, not a mother."

Mami caresses her hair.

"I didn't notice him at first. I was too busy dancing. He took his time. Waited for me. At the stroke of midnight, when everyone on the beach was meant to walk backwards into the sea, he appeared beside me. He held my hand as we entered the ocean," she whispers. Mami begins to tremble.

"His voice was all honey and culantro, like an angel. I didn't know who he was until it was too late. He goes by so many different names."

She cries.

Mami said the man in the linen suit came to her at a moment when she was in her weakest state, when she doubted God and all that was good. He preyed and what came forth was Javier.

"He fed me dirt. That's why I couldn't leave that night," she says, crying. "Me entiendes?"

The nurses tell me there are not many days left. Was the man in the linen suit real, or is this a nightmare that plagues my mother's mind? What happened the night I found her in her bedroom, blood pouring from her arm? Javier with the knife above his head, ready to wield it again, until I pulled it away.

"What did Javy tell you that night, in your bedroom?"

"He said he didn't belong to me. If I didn't let him go, he would stop me from breathing," Mami

says. "Javy was mine. He was mine. My baby boy. He was mine."

I wrap my arms around her. I hold her until she stops shaking.

"I wasn't supposed to leave the island," she says between sobs. "The baby kept growing inside. I couldn't let him take him away. I couldn't."

"It's okay, Mami. I got you."

*

Mami passed away today. The nurse said she died peacefully in her sleep, but I doubt it. No one ever really sleeps in this family. It's been days. My clothes no longer fit me. I'm wasting away in sorrow.

"Just donate everything. There's no point in keeping this stuff."

Gina's hair is turning gray. She looks more like Mami than I ever will. When I picked her up at the airport, her hug still felt cold, like she was bothered. Her and Ray didn't last very long. There were others that followed. A guy who drank too much. Another who hit. Gina said they were all bums. On the drive into the Bronx, she complained about how there was garbage everywhere.

"Don't you want to keep a piece of clothing for yourself?" I ask.

"Why would I do that?" She sits on the very edge of the sofa as if at any moment she will run out the door and flee like she did so many years ago.

"I was thinking of going to the beach."

"For what?" she says with disgust. "You were always too sentimental, even when we were young. What are you going to look for there?"

"I don't know."

"Playing martyr won't bring her back. We all make choices. You've been caged up in this apartment. That's all she ever wanted from us, to be trapped here."

As Gina continues to scold, the walls seem to close in on me. We were a triangle until I was left alone. Now this ghost has returned to the house and she is speaking to me. I can't take it.

I walk outside. There is no one on the bus. It is too cold to go to the beach. The ride takes about thirty minutes. Not long. I zip my bomber jacket and pull the hoodie up. The wind pierces through when I get off. The air hints of snow.

"There's nothing happening in Chocha Beach today. It's too cold," a homeless man yells. I nod and keep walking.

It's been years since I've come to the beach. Everything seems so much dirtier and smaller. I always felt this beach was filled with magic. Now it just seems old and run down.

The day flashes back to me. How Javy kept singing, "Today. Today." Mami's arm covered in bandages. We both ignored it like so many other incidents. That day, Mami asked me to take him to the beach. She didn't get up from her bed to see us off. A sign I should have heeded.

It was a warm day, not the usual scorching heat. The summer was almost ending. Javy was so calm,

so happy. I paid for his fare and we walked to the back of the bus until we found a seat. He stared out the window, drumming his fingers on his lap.

In the ocean, the water was cold at first. Javy kept wanting to swim further, away from the crowds.

"More," he said. His legs no longer touched the sandy floor. Neither did mine. I held him tight.

The lifeguards started to blow their whistles, calling everyone in.

"Get out of the water," they yelled. Javy kept pulling me. I held on, but the current pushed against me. I held on to him with everything.

"Javy," I yelled, while swallowing gulps of water. "Don't let go."

He whispered in my ear. "They are waiting."

I dug my nails into his slender back. His arms no longer around my neck. Suddenly, he pushed away.

"No! Wait!"

It was so hard to speak. So hard to breathe. The undercurrent was pulling us down. Javy wasn't afraid. We went under again, and his cheek was no longer aside mine. I scrambled to reach him. Trying to see in the murky water.

His smile. I saw his smile.

Then, darkness.

Why didn't he make another scar in my arm? Another to keep us together.

Minutes, or was it seconds, passed before hands yanked me out of the ocean. The screeching noises of the ambulance were deafening. Cops. Questions. And me in this despair. The dread of Mami

coming to the hospital and all the wailing when she was told the truth.

"Where were you? You were supposed to take care of him!" The nurses dragged her out of my room.

Here I am again, standing by the shore. He was a water baby, and me? I am stuck here.

*

El Dia de San Juan is in two days and the island pulsates. Every June, there's a tradition on the island to celebrate St. John the Baptist. At the stroke of midnight, you walk backwards into the ocean three times. It was on El Dia de San Juan that Mami met him so many years ago. I now retrace her steps and try to track the moment she fell. Back to the mountain of Corozal where she was born. Back to the beach.

Before she left, Gina told me to get a life. When I told her I was visiting the island, she shook her head.

"You are as stupid as Mami was back then. Men are the devil. You think you are different because you were the helper in this family. You're just dumb."

Titi Luz takes slow steps with the help of a walker. There is a weariness to her. Luz is the last of the sisters. Retired, she left New York years ago. The city is no place for a woman to live by herself, she says. This is a warning.

"Why stay there?" she says. "This house is empty. You can live here."

Luz has three grandkids of her own. The girls sit in front of a large television, shoulders pressed against each other. The lineage of women continues.

She leads me to the room where Mami slept during the months she lived in this house. The bed is made up, but there is a thin layer of dust covering the dresser. A small picture of Mary the Virgin is held on the wall with a single nail. There is a framed picture of the sisters taken when they were young. The color fades from the print. Their young indigenous faces glare seriously at the camera. Curls held up with ribbons. My aunt points to my mother. Unlike her sisters, my mother doesn't face the lens. Instead, she looks to the left with such urgency, as if someone has called to her.

"See, she always wanted to be somewhere else," Titi Luz says with a slight chuckle. "Your mother always had her leg raised. I thought she was going to marry Miguel from church, but she didn't. Instead, she went out every night. She didn't care what the people in town said about her. How she left you alone in New York. They said the most vile things and then when she got pregnant—"

"Who was Javy's father?"

Titi Luz purses her thin lips. She takes the framed picture and gently places it back on the dresser. The outline of dust shows its past placement.

"I don't know," Titi Luz says. She doesn't meet my eyes. "I never met him."

In the distance, her granddaughters laugh.

"I would stay here in this house," she says. "Don't go looking for things that aren't meant for you."

At night, I lay my body on the mattress while the circulating fan makes a humming sound. The mattress is old and the springs dig into my back. I try to imagine what my mother's thoughts were back then. There was a time when I hated her. All those days wondering what she was doing. If she found another daughter to replace me. Instead, she must have been thinking of the time before my existence.

Unable to sleep, I walk barefoot across the cool tile floors, past my aunt's bedroom. She keeps the door open but doesn't stir in her bed. She is as awake as I am. Still, I creep quietly. I stand on the porch and wait. I'm the same age Mami was when she came to live here. Did she feel the pull of the oscillating waves? I feel nothing.

*

The bar plays a fast merengue on the jukebox. I'm up to my third Medalla. A man at the far end invites me to take a shot of rum. I do, and he immediately orders another. In his car, I let him yank my hair. He asks my name, but I stay quiet. When I ask about the man in the linen suit, he calls me crazy.

It is El Dia de San Juan, and the streets are filled with people. Bodies rub up against each other. I hand an old lady my crumpled dollar bills. She wraps a paper towel around the cold Medalla before handing it to me. Strangers caress my arm as I

walk past, urging me to join them. A surge of energy rises. It is about to be midnight. I wear a dress the color of a mountain. If I allow myself to drown in this crowd, will I find solace? Nothing can fill this hole.

The crowd forces me into the water. We link our hands, strangers and lovers. Once. Twice. Each time I walk backwards, I laugh until the tears flow. Did the same thing happen to Mami? Will the man appear to me as well? Enchant me with his words? Force me to stay?

There is grief, and then there is what I am doing. I want to be smothered. I want to continue to walk into this ocean while staring at those dancing on the beach until there is nothing.

The water covers my legs, goes up to my knees. I keep walking. The water now reaches my waist. I call out his name.

"Mami died. She's gone," I say. "Are you there, Javy?"

The water reaches my chest. Everything is numb.

"Where are you? Where did you go?"

I move further in. Up to my arms. My neck. Creatures float against my legs. They nibble on my skin. I close my eyes and let the water cover me. There is only the blackness of the ocean, eager to drag me under. My lungs can't bear it for much longer. Soon. The pressure mounts. It weighs on me and I succumb.

Minutes, or days, later, I open my eyes to the full moon.

"There is nothing out there for you."

A man speaks. He stands before me and his voice is like honey. He bends down. The angles of his face shift against the moonlight. I'm unable to place him. There is no noise. No one left on the beach. The man wraps a blanket around me and tells me I'll be all right.

"What is your name?" he asks.

"Marisol," I say.

"Encantada, Marisol," he says. "Encantada."

It is him and he's ageless and I am following in Mami's footsteps. I'm fearless. He will not do what he did to her because I am different.

Later, he will slowly peel my clothes off. His hands will feel gelatinous, twisting and coiling around me. The words he utters will have no meaning. The lidless gaze of his black pupils will fill me with dread, but I will be unable to name it. Sharp beaks will pierce my skin, scraping and pulling. The sound of the waves breaking against the rocks will be heard, but not my screams. Only then will I understand what happened. Only then will I understand how Mami fell. The man in the fading suit will place something in my mouth, and my teeth will grind the pebbles down.

Behind him, Javy will stand. I will know him instantly by his smile. The man in the suit has taught him how to keep it down. How to scrape the skin from his lips. Javy will stand motionless with a smile plastered on his face. He will not recognize my pain.

But first, there is this moment.

The man holds his hand out for me. I don't want this sorrow. Will he take it? He leads me slowly to the cavern. There is a strong pull that guides me. It is the same pull that made Gina walk out the door, the same that led Mami here. I will not repeat their mistakes.

"Are you ready?" he asks at the entrance.

I pause and turn to him.

"I am not like the others," I say.

Wall

Susan Straight

When America goes to the polls this year, it will not in any way resemble the past. We will not go to neighborhood churches and schools and halls to line up with our family and friends and neighbors and strangers, to wait patiently for our chance to bend and concentrate on a paper ballot or squint at the choices on an electronic voting machine.

Instead, we will probably be marking ballots at a kitchen table or on a living room couch, or if we do attempt to find a polling place, the current administration will make it difficult to scale the walls of disinformation, fear, and the terrible response to the coronavirus that has pushed America to the edge. Will we be partly recovered by November? Does it matter to the president? His campaign slogans generally run to three words. There is no one to Lock Her Up. He did not Drain The Swamp. But he still breaks out his favorite three words: Build The Wall. Given the myriad economic and environmental

disasters of 2020, many Americans have lost sight of the Wall and its bitter toll, the countless migrant children and parents marooned and imprisoned at the border, sent back to Mexico and Central America, or waiting in dangerous areas to see what this nation chooses to do.

Douglas McCulloh, 2020

California can offer lessons of history to the rest of America—histories many of us know because we grew up not far from the border. Our lives in southern California are intrinsically entwined with Mexico, and with the past. This fall, two friends are running for office in Riverside County elec-

tions—Darlene Trujillo Elliot and her cousin Nancy Melendez, descendants of Antonio Trujillo, who with his brothers and sons came to Rancho San Bernardino in 1843 to guard cattle and horses from American thieves. The Trujillos were indigenous Apache people, kidnapped by Spanish colonizers, in Abiquiu, New Mexico, back when the border between America and Mexico shifted at will. Darlene and Nancy and I went to high school together. This is history. No wall can alter it.

My brother was for twelve years the caretaker of a citrus grove here in southern California, only an hour or so from the border. This was in the 1990s, until 2001. He irrigated and pruned and harvested grapefruit and orange trees, the small acreage surrounded by miles of large properties growing citrus since the 1800s. On Fridays, he often brought me bags of Oro Blanco grapefruit or Valencia oranges, and just as often, trembling with anger, told me that La Migra had come again on payday. He spent time with the laborers who were hired to work in adjacent groves, who were picked up on street corners on Monday, who harvested fruit into the night by truck headlights, filling canvas bags, and who on Friday at noon had to run when the green vans showed up. Some foremen would call immigration enforcement to avoid paying the workers, who were deported; on Monday, they would again find men who got into their trucks.

Everyone but the most recent arrivals knew this was how the world worked. Now, with COVID having decimated the lives of agricultural workers,

employers and employees both are desperate. How does this administration ignore reality, constantly proclaiming the success of a few miles of new border wall? Without considering the history of our border, without being honest about how immigrants from Mexico and Central America have been convenient targets in the same way people attack those closest to them when they feel wronged by someone else with power, the president and his allies ignore that American corporations, American health care industries, and American greed made people with brown skin into easy fodder for campaigns.

Not just in 2016, but for decades past.

Here, we grew up with children of braceros. From World War II until 1964, this nation recruited men from Mexico to work the fields in California, Texas, Utah, and Arizona. (By the 1990s, some of those elderly men, who'd been sent back, were still trying to get their paychecks.) I had friends with one brother born in Calexico and another in Mexicali, who lived at times in Tijuana and at times in California. We crossed the border endlessly. Between 1979 and 1984, I crossed with Mexican-American women who organized caravans to bring beans, rice, oranges, clothes, shoes, and medicine to colonias outside Tijuana built on massive dumps, where hundreds of people scavenged each day for glass, metals, cardboard, and food. To discourage this, Mexican officials lit the refuse on fire, and when the flames burned down to smolder, I saw people wrap rags around their shoes and walk on the smoking trash.

Douglas McCulloh, 2020

Back then, we drove past the infamous Soccer Field, a swath devoid of trees, plants, or stones, where the earth had been made fine dust by those gathered every night to wait for dark so they could climb the fence and run through gullies and trails toward San Diego. Border Patrol had Jeeps, but migrants had numbers. Along the fence, vendors sold boiled corn, tacos, water to fuel the hopeful.

These are some headlines from my local newspaper, the Riverside Press-Enterprise, during that time: 1977 — June 11: "State won't check papers for 'illegal aliens' because it slows work referrals, according to a California official." September 14: "Assembly kills measure requiring schools to report illegal alien children." October 25: "Klan begins

border patrol from Brownsville, Texas to Pacific Coast."

1981: March 4: "Open Mexican border plan 'intrigues' Reagan. (President Reagan considers proposal to allow free movement across US-Mexican border—says it would ease unemployment in Mexico and benefit both countries.)"

In 1982, after Mexico defaulted on its national debt, inflation soared, unemployment rose, and the peso was devalued. Mexicans came here because Americans hired them. By October 1986, another "landmark immigration bill" was proposed by the federal government. It offered amnesty, prohibiting companies from hiring undocumented immigrants, while offering legal status to "several million already in the U.S." The bill passed in November, signed by President Reagan.

So many landmarks.

Douglas McCulloh, 2020

In 1994, President Clinton began Operation Gatekeeper along the five westernmost miles of the border, from the San Ysidro checkpoint, directly opposite the Soccer Field, to the Pacific Ocean. Immigrants began to cross in the eastern deserts near Tecate and Imperial County, where many died of dehydration. Phase Two, launched in October 1995, established the first Immigration Court at San Ysidro's Port of Entry. The court expedited hearings and subsequent deportations of people apprehended with false documents or false representation; it also introduced IDENT, a computerized system to single out repeat offenders and non-U.S. citizens with criminal records or active warrants.

E-Verify, anyone?

Operation Gatekeeper fundamentally changed how immigrants lived. Previously, many people went home every year for their village fiestas. They honored their patron saints, made donations for schools, worked on their homes, and then returned to the United States. But by 1997, when I spent three weeks in Oaxaca, entire villages were empty. People who used to make the long drive in shared trucks never came home—only wired money. In a village where the nearest phone was seven kilometers away, I met one old woman and one old man, and the huge turkey that hung caged in their dirt courtyard. They were the loneliest people I'd ever seen. Everyone from their village had gone to El Norte for work, and because of Operation Gatekeeper, could not return. The elders waited for

letters from their family in California. They had no phone.

After Gatekeeper, men brought wives and children back with them, because they might never be able to cross again. This was the most important alteration—the one America has conveniently ignored. Many Mexican communities have effectively recreated their villages here, because of America's insistence on using their labor for agriculture, housing, cleaning, and child care.

For forty years, I've spent time writing in the terrible crossing places of the Mojave Desert near the All-American Canal, where thousands have died of dehydration or drowning; in the evenings, I've seen migrant workers sleeping in truck beds and on cardboard mats in vacant lots, whole families curled together on the asphalt. In 2020, Imperial County, just at the border, and Riverside County, containing Coachella and Thermal, Oasis and Mecca—places where 99% of the population is Spanish-speaking Latino—are among the hardest hit by COVID in the United States. This summer, the Central Valley communities where migrant laborers and longtime residents pick grapes, apples, almonds and pistachios, strawberries and kale have been decimated by the virus.

Who will labor into the night by truck headlights to feed America, and how will America try to resist paying them? Whether you are a human who lives in a New York tower, in a Washington, D.C. townhouse, a small stucco bungalow, or a single-wide trailer, whether your hands smell of expensive lo-

tion or the black rime of citrus, your hair of roofing tar or stylist's gel—daily life consists of the stories you are telling other people.

What stories will Americans tell themselves of the Wall, of real life, of hatred and ignorance this fall?

Three Poems

Lynne Thompson

3/4 Jazz

to honor Yusef Komunyakaa

I am subsumed by how it horns
into obsidian and how it's held up,
ever-captive, on the streets where
Coltrane still lives I love the teak
and teak and teak of it, the hand
drum that recognizes me dark I
adore my ebony as it strides the F

key in Lateef's flute & my ten toes,

coal-colored, can outwit every lyre

as well as didgeridoos of aborigines,

coupling jet and the raven Agogô

bell I am sable & magical powers,

exhaust at least one hundred cymbals

To the Conductors of Pursue, then Kill

I will not stop. Even if a cop appears from Perdition
in a place he has no reason to be. Even if he slams
me against the sidewalk or with the butt of his gun
& tells me I am under arrest but not why; looks
both gleeful and hateful as he asks to see my ID
then throws me into no-one-will-ever-find-her-here.
Even if he drags me along the ground until my flesh
becomes a gravel road then tosses me into the
back seat of a black & white then delivers me to a
sergeant who orders a mug shot that will make me
look wasted. (I am not wasted.) And if, after days
of being forgotten in a jail cell smelling of piss and
vomit, my bladder full of fear, I am taken before
someone who someone else says has the right to
judge me, who asks how do you plead?—I will con-
cede that I'm only guilty of practicing of boketto—
the Japanese art of gazing into the distance with no
thought of anything specific—while black.

World without End, Amen

Never where I was when I first was.
Never this or any other age.
Never unwilling to earth Mars,
belt Orion.
Never let anyone tell you I was never
Amina de Sousa or Clotilde or Tulsa,
Oklahoma.
Never underestimate my sea, my slide
and limb.

Never fail to flute me as Fantasy in D Minor.
Never tuba or lure me unless we
never will meet ever after again.
Never let me down because I will—
you should have no doubt about that.
Never Jesus or hummingbird nor poem
me a never-ending ne'er-do-well.
Never mind. Never
miss a trick—just remember: n=ever.

No Room of One's Own

Emily Hodgson Anderson

During the course of the play the table collects this and that… by the end of the play the table has collected an inventory of objects.

—Tom Stoppard, Arcadia

Our dining room table sits in the middle of our house, though to call it a dining room table endows it with an elegance it lacks. The "room" it occupies isn't truly a room but a causeway, a semi-independent space that connects the living room—which doubles as a foyer, which triples as a play area—to the kitchen, to the bathroom hallway, and beyond. It is a dining room because it is the house-space in which we dine; it is a dining room table because it is the hard surface around which we gather to eat.

Like many a good dining room table, however, its functions vary. The coffee table, ten steps and

one room away, holds toys, notebooks, cups; the built-in-desk, sandwiched between the bookshelves on the other wall, supports a printer, folders, and, when I can find them, my sunglasses and keys. Our dining room table serves as receptacle for all else: a shrine to abundance; the surface that catches the overflow of the overflow of life. This table is as I imagine Odysseus and Penelope's arboreal bedpost, rooted to the foundations of our home, displaying accretions in lieu of rings: layers of spilled syrup, wayward marker, paint. It is where we do homework, draw pictures, read stories. It is where we eat pancakes and have Zoom meetings and pay bills. It is also where I write.

*

10 March, Table: jug of maple syrup; two school photos, framed; breakfast plates; pencil sharpener and associated pencils and pens (loose); copy of Peter Pan; notepad, various to-do items; copy of Hamlet; copy of the collected verses of A.A Milne; daily planner; vase of assorted roses, new and old; edited collection of scholarly essays (to be reviewed); manila folders and legal pad; child's camera; shoebox diorama; copy of The New Yorker (issue number obscured); magic wand (a piece); copy of Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own; printed essay, "Viva Voce"; essay on Virginia Woolf, "Penelope at Work"; dishtowel; baseball cap.

*

Virginia Woolf may have lamented for me this fact. "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction," Woolf asserts at the outset of her famous essay, an idea her narrator came to while sitting not in such a room but on a river's banks. Indeed, her narrator is subsequently barred from the library that might have furnished such a room, because in her time "ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a [male] Fellow of the College." Between the 1929 publication of Woolf's work and my 2020 reflection on it, I see evidence of change: unlike Woolf's narrator, I have professional security and a job, I feel, that pays me fairly for what I do. I have a library at school that admits me, and an office into which I can go and close the door. I have, occasionally, a babysitter I can hire, and even a garage at home where I can retreat. Still, at the end of the day, I spend much of my intellectual life at our table, in a room that is not a room, in a space with no doors to close.

This fact makes me consider everything from the status of feminism to the nature of the writing process itself. "Women never have half an hour… that they can call their own," writes Woolf, quoting Florence Nightingale, describing me. And yet I'm conscious today of a more general frenzy, perhaps symptomatic of the technology and social media that make us all, regardless of gender, susceptible to interruption and distractions that we voluntarily seek out. Family structures are changing too, rendering the interruptions Woolf attributes to wom-

en's parenting and domestic duties more gender-neutral, more equally shared.

Still, in frustrated moments as a writer, I feel Woolf's resentment of my state. If I were a man, I think, or, if I had more money, more room, more time . . . perhaps I would emerge as Woolf's cryptic Judith Shakespeare, my genius freed from the domestic labor of my life. I dream of that Platonic office—airy, sunlit, still—in which inspiration flourishes, and everything remains organized and neat. I crave more of the privacy that Woolf supports, that she feels women in particular have lacked.

*

12 March, Table: jug of maple syrup; two school photos, framed; associated pencils and pens (loose); copy of Peter Pan; notepad, blank; copy of Hamlet; copy of the collected verses of A.A Milne; daily planner; vase of assorted roses, new and now very old; box of pencils (Blackwing, very nice); copy of Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own; printed essay, "Viva Voce"; essay on Virginia Woolf, "Penelope at Work"; Transformer toy; plastic candle; sunglasses; clothespin with paper face attached; coffee cup; iPhone; dish of salt.

*

Interruption, Woolf asserts, has shaped the types of literature women write. One of my favorite Woolf contentions is that interruption has pushed women

more frequently toward the crafting of "prose and fiction" rather than poetry or plays, since when one is writing fiction, "less concentration is required." Yet even crafting fiction under such conditions amazes Woolf. She describes Jane Austen doing all her writing in sitting rooms, subject to casual interruptions, driven to hide her manuscript under blotting paper every time a visitor entered. Austen's contemporary Maria Edgeworth also wrote in this manner, surrounded by the siblings and half-siblings who made up her father's large brood (22 children he had finally, by four different women, a man prolific in every sense). These women wrote through chaos, though Austen and Edgeworth, like Woolf, never had kids of their own. In my life, I've finished many a memo, reader's report, work email, lesson plan, and book review in a similar manner, at the dining room table, tilting my computer screen away from my boys. (This essay, too, their activities and presence in its very warp and woof.)

Interestingly, my multitasking has not yet transformed me into an Austen, much less a poet. It has, however, moved me to consider how the condition of "interruption" that Woolf indicates as characteristic of a woman's life is not inimical to creativity, full-stop. Far from lamenting the narrative of chaos that surrounds them, women writers often mourn the isolating effects of the writing life. "I remember once . . . I was just in the solitary, melancholy state you describe, and I used to feel relieved and glad when the tea-urn came into the silent room, to give me a sensation by the sound of its boiling,"

Edgeworth writes to a woman writer friend. "Would Pride and Prejudice have been a better novel," Woolf muses, if Jane Austen had not had to do all her writing in a communal space? Interestingly, she feels that it would not.

I have such musings about my writing, too. For all my moments of resentment, I know I've wasted many an hour solo, in a room with a door that is tightly closed. I know, too, that I rarely feel more lonely than when I am uninspired. Writing is hard work, even when conditions are "perfect," and perfect conditions have a way of making me feel guilty when the work is hard. What does it mean for a writer when, given time and opportunity, the words still won't come? How much easier to attribute a lull in writing to external agency or another's needs: the fact that the washing machine has gone off, or a child is crying, or a cup has spilled.

*

13 March, Table: jug of maple syrup; two school photos, framed; copy of Peter Pan; notepad, blank; copy of Hamlet; vase of assorted roses, some dead; box of pencils (Blackwing, very nice); copy of Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own; printed essay, "Viva Voce"; essay on Virginia Woolf, "Penelope at Work"; coloring book and markers; catalogues: Athleta, REI; sight-word flashcards, scattered; clothespin with paper face attached; assorted bills (dentist office); rose petals; dish of salt.

*

Interruptions, the very structure of Woolf's essay suggests, are not always occasions to be mourned. Poetry lovers may regret that Coleridge, writing Kubla Kahn in a delirious, opium-induced haze, was interrupted mid-thought by "a person on business from Porlock" and never thereafter able to complete the poem. Yet for every Coleridge, there is a David Hume, who finds himself so tortured by an isolation-inspired "delirium" that he preaches the benefits of dinner, play, and backgammon for his philosophizing, not to mention his overall quality of life. Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose biography I read when in a flu-inspired, fever-induced state, would knock off at the end of the day to watch westerns and let his brain recharge. (Intriguingly, this is the main fact I remembered about him, once my own delirium had passed.) Wordsworth toggled between wandering lonely as a cloud and the "joint labour" of his friendship with Coleridge, his bouts of writing interspersed with their famous, frequent walks.

There can be something maddening, these examples suggest, about isolated focus—something maddening, and also punitive, about a room of one's own. Scan the headlines for the toll taken by loneliness on mental health. Recall the titular yellow wallpaper that haunts the protagonist of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story; recall the fits inspired in Jane by the Red Room in Jane Eyre. Consider Ramona, of the Beverly Cleary books, who finds herself tortured by the transition from a bedroom

shared with her sister to one meant for her alone. Why else does Frances the badger persistently sneak out of her bedroom in Bedtime for Frances? Why else do children ask to sleep with the door ajar? Mary Shelley cues us to find Victor Frankenstein's "workshop of filthy creation" suspect precisely because it is a "solitary chamber," isolated at the top of the house.

The difference between Woolf's room and these examples is the same as the difference between Wordsworth's or Wittgenstein's situation and my own: do we experience isolation (or its converse, interruption) by compulsion or by choice?

*

13 March, Table, night: jug of maple syrup; two school photos, framed; copy of Peter Pan*; notepad, blank; copy of* Hamlet*; vase of assorted roses, dead ones now removed; box of pencils (Blackwing, very nice); copy of Virginia Woolf,* A Room of One's Own*; printed essay, "Viva Voce"; essay on Virginia Woolf, "Penelope at Work"; coloring book and markers; phonics worksheets (scattered, incomplete); iPhone headphones; fork and paper napkin; dishtowel; dish of salt.*

*

Writing, I think, writing these words while the boys are in the shower and bath, doesn't always require isolation so much as produce it.

*

14 March, Table: jug of maple syrup; two school photos, framed; copy of Peter Pan*; notepad, blank; copy of* Hamlet*; empty vase; box of pencils (Blackwing, very nice); copy of Virginia Woolf,* A Room of One's Own*; printed essay, "Viva Voce"; essay on Virginia Woolf, "Penelope at Work"; coloring book and markers; one breakfast plate; copy of* Frankenstein*; Kleenex, lightly used; coffee cup; rose petals; dishtowel; dish of salt.*

*

I've finally read that dining-room-table essay on Virginia Woolf. I tracked it down for the subject matter and because it was written by someone I know. I also flagged it for its title: "Penelope at Work." What does Penelope, the heroine from Homer's classical epic *The Odyssey*, have to say about the twentieth-century conditions of feminism outlined in *A Room of One's Own*? One connection lies in the designation of women's labor. "Take up your own work, / the loom and the distaff," Penelope is twice told. Go back to those domestic tools of weaving and spinning, she is directed by men, go back to that inner sanctum in which these works take place—though those tools also represent the key metaphors for the telling of tales.

Penelope is, of course, famous for her weaving, or more accurately, for tricking her suitors by

undoing her weaving every night. I'll marry one of you, she tells them, once I've finished making my father-in-law a funeral shroud. And so for years, she weaves during the day and unpicks what she has woven after dark. By doing so, she postpones the need to choose a husband; she also postpones, I've always thought, the threat of death.

The other connection to Woolf's essay has to do with how the weaving and the trickery happen in some private room, so that Penelope, although following orders, isn't exactly banished or confined. Making—and unmaking—occur in her mysterious boudoir, in a manner that the common sitting rooms of Austen and Edgeworth could never support. She's trapped with her domestic labor, yet her domestic labor becomes the creative labor I now miss. Maybe, she tells me, I can reclaim the work I resent as material. Maybe I can reclaim as privacy, or for narrative inspiration, an isolation that would otherwise feel enforced.

In the contemporary essay on Woolf that I read, the movement of Penelope's weaving—two steps forward, two steps back—also finally becomes emblematic of "a woman's work which is never done." These days, as I juggle homeschooling my children with teaching my students, emailing my colleagues, and keeping my refrigerator stocked and my dishes mostly clean, the phrase hits especially hard. There is something in this idiom of the conditions of interruption, of Jane Austen's blotting paper, of how the work of domesticity takes precedence over the other "work" a woman must hide. There is something

in Woolf's lament, as if without the disruptions, the extra chores, the daily-ness of laundry, lunches, teaching, and baths, other work might become complete. Yet there is also something wonderful in this phrasing: something that captures the consistency of parenting, or of devotion to one's art.

Penelope's loom, hidden in Woolf's interior, contains a movement of the ocean, with its waves that come and go and come again. The interruptions of life are as transient as its moments of isolation. If weaving is writing, and writing is weaving, then how much more hopeful to say that it will be ongoing, without teleology, without morbidity, without end.

*

16 March, Table, night: jug of maple syrup; two school photos, framed; daily planner; notepad, blank; vase of roses (pink) with branches of rosemary, intermixed; copy of Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own*; two placemats, Star Wars, one ripped; copy of* Alice in Wonderland*; book on Lewis Carroll; copy of* Emma*, very old; coloring book and markers; sunglasses; potholder; dish of salt.*

Postcards from the West: A Photodiary

Pam Houston

Amend

I used to believe, until much too recently, that there was someone or something that looked out

for me whenever I veered dangerously close to trouble. I didn't know whether it was God (god), or some other collective good, or my dead friend Shelton, or the ghost of the woman who raised me (whose name was Martha Washington) come from the other side to pluck me up out of danger and set me down safely in the nick of time. Recently, I have come to understand that what I have thought, all this time, was a benevolent spirit was probably just white privilege.

I have lived for 27 years in a valley were people have more guns than children, more guns than cars, more guns that books (even bibles), more guns than bags of potato chips, more guns than ten gallon hats. I used to know why I lived here, amidst these mountains and forests, in this beautiful valley of ten thousand guns, but after Donald Trump got elected, I forgot.

When I was in fourth grade, I got caught stealing a candle in the shape of a cat from Spenser Gifts, and not only did no one kneel on my windpipe, or shoot me seven times in the back and leave me paralyzed; I wasn't even arrested. I was taken into the back room, where amid boxes full of lava lamps and psychedelic posters, I received a stern talking to by a security guard before the manager called my parents to come and take me home.

I expect I will die soon, not from Covid-19 probably, as I have already had it, and hopefully not even from the heart and lung damage I have sustained from it. I think I will die here in this valley, at the end of gun, held in the hands of a man who be-

lieves it is his right to shoot an outspoken woman because the president or Tucker Carlson or Laura Ingraham told him so. If that sounds grandiose, (and it does, I can hear it), all I can say is that I have seen the bullet leave the barrel, repeatedly, in slow motion, have seen the face behind the gun, with its patchy sideburns, plump cheeks, and tiny eyes, in recurring dreams that send my heart rate soaring.

By being an outspoken woman in the valley of ten thousand guns during this fascist takeover of the United States of America, I have made myself a target, and yet I can't ever seem to shut up! Because to be silent, after the life I have been privileged to lead as a cisgendered Caucasian woman—a very good life by any measure—would be, and I say this as a nonreligious person, sinful.

Toni Morrison once said that if you find yourself free, it is your job to reach your hand down and pull someone else up to freedom. I am only one woman, living in the valley of ten thousand guns, but I have a platform, and one of my jobs is to use it, that and to help my students get their beautiful books into the world.

I was raised by a malignant narcissist. I know what it is to be helpless in the face of daily terror, daily rape, a broken femur, permanent physical and psychological damage. To be helpless in the face of a bully, and a system that never believes the woman or the child. Between the tyranny of my father's house and the tyranny of the Trump presidency, I had forty-one beautiful years full to the brim with

freedom. I don't mind so much that the bill is coming due.

*

Horse

My new horse Benjamin likes to take baths in the stainless steel water trough that is meant for drinking, the same water trough that my older, possibly dying horse, Deseo, has been afraid of all his life. While Deseo has spent nearly thirty years sneaking up on that trough as if it is about to make a fast move on him, Ben runs straight at it and dunks his head all the way to his ears. He lifts one leg up and over the two-foot side, kicks roughly half the 100

gallons over his flank until he is soaked, then gracefully switches legs and uses the rest of the water to soak his other side. He finds a nice dusty spot and drops, rolls on his back and kicks his legs in the air. Then, he lurches to his feet and shakes so hard his teeth rattle.

Ben came to me because he needed a new home and I needed a horse in my life that wasn't dying. He is big for a quarter horse, seventeen hands, a dark bay who looks like somebody hurled a bucket of white paint at his left shoulder. Every morning when I come outside with the carrots and apples, he makes a noise like a Harley Davidson outfitted with glass packs, idling. If I don't close the barn door quick enough, he ducks his head and follows me in, turns his big body around in all the tight spaces, offers to assist me in throwing the hay. When I give him his grain in a shallow rubber feeder, he doesn't mind sharing it with Isaac, the mini-donkey, or a chipmunk or a ground squirrel or the magpie that often perches on his broad rump to eat insects. Ben seems not to be startled by anything, whereas Deseo crow hops and spins every time the barn creeks or the wind blows.

In a few weeks or months, I will have to put Deseo down, because no matter how much I soak and soften and pulverize his food, he is thirty-two and has run out of teeth, which is what happens to horses when they live to be old. He is not lame or blind or otherwise uncomfortable. He just doesn't have enough meat on his bones to last the winter. He will leave Benjamin and Isaac to cavort around

this 120 acres, until the snow gets too deep and they commit to the barn, and the little pasture to the south of the barn where the wind is blocked and the sun warms the ground all winter.

Every animal I have ever cared for has had something important to teach me, and Ben's arrival in the summer of 2020, this summer of so much death and fear, serves as a reminder that carrots and apples are cause for celebration, that a magpie on your back works better than fly spray, and that a scary water trough, looked at correctly, is an excellent opportunity for a bath.

*

West

A male friend asked what I had been thinking about lately and I said "the feminization of the myth of the American West." The look on his face was one part condescension, two parts disgust. Or that

is what I imagined from the tone of his voice, because we were talking on the phone.

He said, "That's a little too academic for me," which made me laugh. I have been accused of a lot of things in my life, but never of being too academic.

Some years ago, when I visited the fracking fields of North Dakota, I saw nothing but men in trucks and fast food restaurants erected so quickly they hadn't even paved their parking lots. I followed a man in a truck for a hundred miles along a two-lane highway between Killdeer and Williston, watching him flick cigarette after cigarette into the dry September grass. The beat of a Smashmouth song reached back and curled inside my windows. His bumper sticker read "I (heart) Crack Whores."

"It's just that I've been thinking," I said to my friend. "The stories you guys carry around all day might not be all that sustainable anymore. You know, the whole break the horse, tame the land, kill the Indian, save the man, frack her till she blows type of ethic. Those stories might not be working out so well for the rest of us."

Only after he hung up on me did I realize my hands were shaking. Right after that, I realized he had never actually been my friend.

*

Possible

When you are a dog, all things are possible. That the human might give you the hamburger right off her plate, that the human might take you for a walk, even though she took you an hour ago. That the human might go away forever, or that she might come home and never leave again. That a bull elk might pop out of the trees at any minute, that those little brown birds that fly low to the ground might not elevate themselves sufficiently this one time, that the eviscerated squeaky toy might once again find its voice.

The human might stop to pet you on her way down the hall. She might, this night, invite you into the bed with her. It might not be too smoky tomorrow to go for a hike, and on the hike there might be blueberry treats, and squirrels, and a creek still

running even this far into the drought. Or if there is no hike, she might ask if you want to go for a ride in the car. She might (or might not) pass the turn off to the vet (yikes), but if she does (hooray!), she might drive instead down the road that leads to the lake.

At the lake, she might throw the stick for you. She might throw the stick for you one hundred times. She might throw the stick for you so many times you'll wish (only a little bit and with one part of your brain) that she would stop, but you can't let her see that, because if she wants to keep throwing the stick, you know it is your job to retrieve it. You promise yourself that if she throws the stick a thousand times, you will continue to retrieve it. There is no amount of times she could throw the stick where you would let her down.

Later, when you are back home, the human might look at the news and cry, as she does, these days, so often. She might lay on the couch with you and put her head on your flank. When she closes her eyes, you close your eyes too and tell her with your mind that all things are possible. That the bad guys can't win forever, that even at the vet's you sometimes get cookies, that love, and this you are absolutely sure about, has always been stronger than fear.

*

Renew

My vet, Doc Howard, says sheep are born looking for a place to die, and it's true. I have lost many sheep over the years in a lot of different ways. One ram got cast up against the barn (that's rancher talk for being so stuck you die); another died of a twisted gut. One ewe caught pneumonia after the stress of a routine shearing, and something that was probably nose bots killed another. A few years back we were stalked by a 300-pound black bear for the whole month of May and by the first of June, I had nine dead sheep and only three living, and one of those, Jordan, had her head inside the bear's mouth long enough to have four holes in her neck big enough for me to insert an entire index finger.

And yet, every April, no matter how diminished our numbers, a lamb or two or four are born. Sometimes they are a little bit premature, and I

have to hang out in the barn for a couple of nights, keeping them warm, force feeding them with a bottle, and convincing the ewe that the baby is worth trying to save. Tank went from nearly starving to death on day two, losing the use of his back legs (a sure sign), to ramming the holy hell out of the water trough on day seven, which qualifies around here as a raging success.

The lambs smell like lanolin and hope, and when they leap for joy out in the pasture, twisting their little bodies into one and a half gainers over the top of the tall grass, it is hard to remember that anything bad is happening, that 200,000 people and counting, for example, are senselessly, unnecessarily dead.

Today we have so much fire smoke in the air from the eight states that are burning to the west of us that we have donned our Covid-19 masks to feed the animals. Which feels convenient for a second.

Seven years ago, 119,000 acres on three sides of my ranch burned in the largest fire in southwestern Colorado history. I took my friend Maggie hiking in the burn last week, and when she told me that walking among the burned trees made her sad, I realized I no longer saw them. I saw the fireweed, the baby spruce, the regenerated stands of a million skinny six-year-old aspen trees. I took a minute to ponder whether my myopia was a sign of resilience or denial, to think about the fine line between being honorably optimistic and dangerously naive. Again and again, the world asks us to see the beauty and the terror, to hold the wonder and the grief

together, to learn once and for all that they are two sides of the very same coin.

*

Cluster

When shelter in place began, I bought eight four-week-old pullets from a lady in Walsenburg, Colorado, about a three-hour drive from here. We met in the parking lot of the Safeway. It resembled a drug deal. The pandemic was new, everyone was masked, nobody wanted to hang out for very long. She handed me a cardboard box without speaking. I could feel the warmth of the chicks' bodies through the sides. When I got home, it turned out there were nine chickens instead of the eight I'd paid for, but one of the two orange birds had very large feet. I named him Rooster and now he crows,

nonstop, from seven in the morning till nine in the morning, which as roosters go is a pretty good deal.

It was too cold to put four-week-old chicks in the barn in April, so I raised them in a stainless steel horse trough in the guest bedroom. Even though it was a giant trough, they all clustered at one end, not for heat, I don't think, but for comfort. Each morning until they were ten weeks old, I would put them back in their cardboard box and carry them out to the part of the barn where they would eventually live along with the Icelandic sheep, and every day at sundown, I would scoop them back into the box and return them to the guest bedroom. I named one of the chicks Insanity because she was the hardest to catch and spent much of her time outside running around in circles. I named another Karen because she was white and screeching all the time. My favorite right from the start was Little Grouse, named for her colors and the intricacy of her markings. She was calm and sweet and is still, all these weeks later, the smallest bird. Soon they will begin laying as many eggs as we can eat, and that will make us feel like we have Covid-19 ingenuity.

Last week it was uncommonly hot. In the nineties. When I first moved here twenty-seven years ago, before anyone I knew had said the words climate change, the oldsters in town started talking about the end of the world if the temperature got to eighty. Today, it is supposed to snow fourteen inches. That's a lot for the first week of September, and it will likely send many of the people who

have been living all over this country in their motorhomes all summer back to wherever they come from. It is supposed to get down to thirteen degrees overnight and my chickens will be tested for the very first time.

It's 120 degrees in San Luis Obispo, 130 in Death Valley. Fires are raging up and down the West Coast, which is a cluster of a different kind. I read yesterday that soon much of the southwestern United States will be uninhabitable by humans, which will at least be nice for the coyotes and the lizards and the snakes. What would happen if we asked those folks in their motor homes—which get a mile and a half per gallon—to park them, permanently? I think we know the answer. Just think about what happened when we asked people to put a thin piece of cloth across their faces because 200,000 of their countrymen had died.

The president said today that the generals want to start and accelerate wars to keep the companies that make the bombs happy, which was a thing we all knew, but still so funny to hear it from his lips. I believe that is what we call speaking with impunity.

Another cluster: A seventeen-year-old boy's mother drove him across a state line so he could murder two unarmed protestors with an automatic weapon he is not old enough to own. Show of hands: How many of us prefer to have untrained teenagers patrolling our streets with weapons of war? The orange man is always speaking with impunity. Unlike my rooster, he never stops crowing and has zero Covid-19 ingenuity. I want to be like

Little Grouse, but I lean, by nature, toward Insanity. Somebody, somewhere, sound the alarm.

*

Resolve

Somedays I wonder how many of us have been raised by malignant narcissists. I think the answer is probably: A lot. It is to you, my fellow survivors, that I am speaking in this essay. I know that when we were too little to do anything about it, to free ourselves of the tyranny, it sucked, hard. But (tell me if it is the same for you) when we finally did free ourselves, if we did (and I did, and if you are reading this, I am guessing you did too), life was glorious, even more glorious, I might argue (though I would be open to be proven wrong) than it was

for people who were raised by loving and generous adults.

When I left my parents' house, at seventeen, to go to college at Denison University, I walked out of a dungeon of gaslighting, violence, and fear and into a garden of humanism, good works, and critical compassionate thought. If someone had dragged me from Denison back into the hell of my parents' house, I would have chewed off my own forearm to escape. But no one did, and there was not one day in the forty years between my departure for college and the last election that I didn't remember to be grateful I was free.

Now, I am back in my childhood home, with my 330 million brothers and sisters, which includes you, dear survivor. I bet at first you were amazed to find yourself there. Is it Margaret Atwood who coined the phrase "the unexpected inevitable"?

Our passports have become useless documents, our government is systematically killing us, to the tune of more than a thousand per day, and destroying our institutions with a velocity and efficiency, even I, who saw it coming, would have not believed. Our freedoms are being challenged and stolen, one by one, and we are on the verge of losing the ability to speak out, to make art, even to dream of a better way of life.

For me, and I would guess for you, my friend, it is neither childhood nor the president that is the shocker, but the forty intervening years of freedom. And I am here to tell you that it is us, the children who were raped in the shower, who had their bones

broken, who had cigarettes put out on their hands, we are the ones who were born to rise to this moment in which we find ourselves.

It is easy to gaslight a child. Shockingly easy to gaslight a country. But I got out, and so did you, my fellow traveler, and what we understand, all the way down to our bones, is that the cruelty is, and has always been, the point. Surviving our families of origin took all our ingenuity. It offered us a glimpse of our own power, and we knew we were unstoppable. That is why you and I are so important to this battle. We have learned to think one step ahead of the malignant narcissist, and we'll chew off our own arms to get out of his trap. We have arrived at the moment of the unexpected inevitable and this time, we have each other.

Come. Let's rise together, and reveal all that we have learned.

More was Lost in the War

Daniel Alarcón

Translated from the Spanish by Ilan Stavans

1

Five years ago, when I was being shown the apartment where I now live with my family, the agent reached the last room at the end of the hallway, approached the window, and apologized. On the other side of the avenue there was—is—an immense and incomplete construction. That summer day in 2015, one could see, in the middle of an empty lot full of holes and tunnels and giant mounds of soil, the unfinished skeletons of a pair of half-assembled buildings. It was enough to make out, if not the details, at least the scope of the project's dizzying ambition. It was ten in the morning and hundreds of construction workers scurried among the enormous machines.

"It's loud, I'm not going to lie to you," the woman said with an uncomfortable smile. "But someday they'll finish."

The truth is I wasn't bothered. I'd left New York in 2002 and had always wanted to come back. I thought of my younger son, just two years old. He'll be a New Yorker, I thought, one of those who measure their age by the size of the buildings that spring up around them. I imagined he'd spend hours looking out at the cranes from his window, the trucks, the construction workers moving amid the chaos, and that it would be a privilege for him to grow up in this forest of steel and cement and then be able to say, as a grown-up, that he remembered when none of this existed. This, in the end, is what it means to belong to a place: to carry its history with you always, intuitively. I always wanted to be a New Yorker; at times, not being one has felt like a personal defeat. I thought: my son will be a New Yorker without even giving it a second thought.

He's six years old now, with only vague memories of having lived anywhere else, and he doesn't even notice the details of the city that felt so special to me when I moved here in 1995. Like a true resident of Manhattan, he thinks that all cities are islands. His favorite breakfast is a bagel with lox. He knows uptown from downtown. He has favorites among the many bridges that connect the boroughs to each other and to the world. When we share the elevator with neighbors, my son, polite and well-

behaved, asks which is their stop—not which is their floor—as if he were a conductor on a subway train.

And on more than a few occasions, I've found him looking out the window, basking in the sun while contemplating the massive construction and its constant movement. In four years, four buildings have appeared, open to the public now, and there are three more in progress. They don't stop building. They never stop. That's New York, I used to tell my son proudly, when we'd look out the window together in wonder as the construction workers prepared for another day of work under a merciless rain or heavy snow. It doesn't matter how cold it is, I'd say. The winds blowing furiously from the river can't stop them. Nor the oppressive heat of summer. They never stop. Never.

Until last month, of course, when everything stopped.

2

I spent my first few years here in a kind of invented nostalgia, tormented by the idea that the truest version of New York had existed five, ten, or twenty years before I arrived. I walked a lot, wanting to see every street, each building, and each neighborhood and record the details, to talk to everyone I found on the way and collect their stories; sometimes I'd take the subway to the last stop, as if I needed to confirm that the city actually ended. I have a collection of memories of those early years I wouldn't dare share with anyone. Not because they're com-

promising or scandalous but because they are precisely the opposite. They're ordinary: first loves and broken hearts, small successes and defeats that somehow felt enormous. I remember readings and concerts and works of art that transformed me, but not more than my friends' smiles, which gave me life. I came to New York at eighteen, immature, insecure, curious, long-haired. I shaved my head a few weeks after arriving, thinking I might look less out of place that way. The memories I have of those years are those of any adolescent who comes to a strange new place and tries to invent a version of himself he doesn't hate. I'm so moved by these ordinary memories that I'm ashamed to present them as special.

Maybe the only thing special about them is their background—New York. I realize now I arrived in a moment of transition: Rudy Giuliani was mayor and police violence was on the rise, along with an economic expansion that erased entire communities. I came to the city before 9/11, when we were all less afraid, or perhaps when we understood fear differently. Little by little I came to realize I hadn't arrived late, but right on time, that we all arrive right on time to this place; the city that never stops changing always makes space for the new arrival who wants to become someone else. I fell in love with the city, a love with precise points on the map and on the calendar. Astor Place, November 17, 1995. The West End, March 9, 1997. Yankee Stadium, June 4, 2001. Now that the pandemic has cut history in half, I think a lot about the version of New

York we might find on the other side, how it will transform the geography of my memory. To think of an after that isn't devastating requires a great deal of imagination, perhaps more than I have, and I want to protect my memories at all costs, though I know it's impossible.

Before all this, I used to look out my window in the morning and watch the passersby on their way to the subway. I'd note how they were dressed in order to decide what I needed to wear or how to dress my youngest son. With or without boots. With or without a raincoat. With or without a scarf. Even for something so basic, I relied on my neighbors. Now that I see hardly anyone out the window, I don't know what to wear. It hardly matters, I suppose, because I don't have anywhere to go.

New York without New Yorkers makes no sense. It's late April now and we've become accustomed to the sirens. More than once, on the short walks I take with my dog, I've come across an ambulance parked in front of a building, just in time to see first responders dressed like astronauts rush in to pick up a sick neighbor. Faced with a scene like this, it's normal to wonder if the patient will come home someday or die alone in a crowded, overwhelmed hospital. It's normal to ask these questions, just as it's normal to weep from anger and helplessness.

3

More was lost in the war.

I liked that phrase a lot when I was a child, although it took me years to understand. My mother often used it to minimize or dismiss a childhood grievance. For example, if I said I wanted some toy all my American friends had, my mother, always calm, would swat away my complaints with a simple "more was lost in the war." It was brutal and bulletproof, no way around it. It was years before I finally dared to ask her what I always wondered: which war?

Any war, she said. All of them.

Despite what was happening in Peru, where I was born, war for me was something exotic, distant. I grew up in a peaceful suburb of a peaceful city in the American South. Everything happened on the other side of the world. You'd see it on TV, mixed in and blurred with commercials and sitcoms and sporting events. As a gringo, I knew our wars were constant, but they were fought in faraway countries, where death and destruction were distributed among the unlucky ones who had decided to live in the line of fire. We in the United States didn't even keep a tally of what they lost, since it wasn't our problem. No one taught me this. Like all nationalist myths, I learned it on my own.

By now, we've become accustomed to losing, of course, and not only in war. As I write this, the number of deaths from coronavirus in the United States has reached 50,000, with more than 11,500 in New York City alone. It's a frightening number, absurd, tragic. I'm here, in this city, and have trouble believing that thousands of my neighbors have

died unnecessarily from this plague. At the same time, I know this number will only grow, and that maybe, at some not so distant point in the future, someone will read this text, will come across that number, and will find it small. Quaint. There will be so many more dead. My incredulity will seem naïve.

The building where we live has emptied out, and these days, if we meet anyone in the hallways, we avoid each other. We don't even smile, as if the virus could spread with even that small gesture of kindness. It's because we're afraid. All of us. We take the elevator alone. We lock the doors and wait for the sirens that never seem far away. From the window, we see the ambulances race by on empty streets. There they go, I tell my son, who understands enough to be afraid. They never stop, I say. Never.

Crystal Palace

Carribean Fragoza

Look, mi'ja, when I was maybe seventeen or eighteen years old, I worked at a boutique selling fancy French beauty products, over there in Guadalajara.

The boutique was luxurious, with crystals and mirrors everywhere. Everything sparkled like a diamond, even the little glass bottles filled with the fine lotions. But I felt a bit nervous there, you know, like if I moved too quickly or carelessly, I would break something. I was used to doing things using my strength and with ganas. That's how my amá taught me. You do things with ganas, mi'ja, she would say to me. With ganas you pick up the kids, my little brothers, to wipe off the dirty snot dripping from their noses. With ganas you scrub your father's hard denim pants over the lavadero, and with ganas you sweep our part of the street so that no one can say we are not clean people.

But in this place, La Freu Freu, it was called, you did everything very delicately.

"With finesse, my dear," the Señora Sanz, my boss, would say. "Look," she would correct me, lifting her tiny little nose. Then she would demonstrate how my work was to be done. With the tippy tips of her fingers, she would pick up a tiny flask containing some precious fluid and carefully place it on the glass display case. You could hear the sweet little sound, a ting, like a little bell every time she showed me how it should be done.

I had the habit of taking the glass bottles and jars five at a time, picking them up and securing them against my breasts, soft and safe. You better believe that breasts are the safest place to keep important things. This is where I keep my coin purse, and mind you, I have never had a single cent stolen. Of course, it's safe so long as you keep it that way and you don't allow busy hands to make their way in there. But to each her own chi chis, I always say.

This is how I would set up the boutique more quickly, pressing the precious containers against my breasts, until one day la Señora Sanz came in with her little shoes going clic clic clic over the polished floor, and she screamed so suddenly that it made me jump with fright.

"Dios mio!" she shrieked.

I dropped all of the glass jars and bottles, and they broke into a million pieces on the checkered tiles. The floor was splattered with precious white creams, like the pigeon shit that covered the plaza outside.

"Such a stupid girl!" she screamed at me, spitting out the words between her pearly teeth and red

lips. "What are you doing? You are a careless fool, a brute!"

It was the first time anyone who was not my mother had screamed at me that way. I stood there stunned with my hands hanging at my sides and my breath frozen in my lungs.

"How could you carry these things in that way? Cómo se te ocurre? These," she said pointing at the white puddle on the floor with her sharp fingernail, "these are fine products."

Still frozen, watching her red mouth and pearly teeth open and close, close and open, I thought, What does she mean, cómo se me ocurre? This was the only way I knew how to do things carefully and well. Just that way, in the safety of my hands and breasts, I carried the finest, most delicate things in the whole world. This was how I carried my little brothers and sisters from one place to another, de aquí pa'allá. Just imagine what would happen to me if I ever dropped one of them and broke their head. What did she mean, how I could carry these things that way? I couldn't understand what this woman standing in front of me, moving her jaws, waving her arms and bony hands, was saying.

"A hopeless brute!" continued the Señora Sanz. When she saw my confusion, she moved to show me what she meant.

She gathered her rage, rearranging loosened strands of hair back into her hairdo. She licked the specks of saliva off her lips and walked with her little high heels clic clic clic to the display case. She

took a tiny jar from a box and fixed her eyes on mine while she explained.

"Look dear, in this boutique, we only have the best of the best. Here, only the best of the best people come in through our doors. This is not a place for stupidities, or clumsiness. We save those for the flea market."

Although the bits of glass that shattered across the floor hadn't touched me, I felt wounded anyway. I stood there remembering the Ponds cold creams and Avon perfumes that my mother and I bought from Doña Cosme on Thursdays at the market. I felt something deep inside me hurt, as if a splinter of glass had somehow penetrated my heart.

"I am going to have to ask you to please be more careful. And this must never happen again. Now, get to work and clean up this mess." She placed the tiny crystal bottle onto the illuminated display case and walked off, leaving me standing there alone at the counter.

I stood without moving for several minutes, staring at that stupid little thing, so delicate, so pretty. To me, it seemed as precious as a jewel. It was something my hands were never meant to touch. And suddenly, I felt terrified, afraid to move, since any clumsy gesture of mine could make the entire crystal palace come tumbling down, and those marvelous elixirs of eternal beauty and infinite perfection would be lost forever.

I could feel my bones growing thick, my legs and arms like monstrous tree trunks. My breasts transformed into tremendous masses of flesh,

mountains, dormant volcanoes. My feet seemed enormous and permanently disfigured from going around barefoot most of my life. My face was far too wide to turn and look at my surroundings, so brilliant, cold, and sharp.

I stood there motionless for a long time, afraid to even breathe lest I stir up a cyclone. I waited, taking tiny sips of air until I shrank back down to a size that would not cause a disaster. I stepped forward warily, measuring each one of my movements. Slowly I mopped the floor and carefully cleaned every surface. When I had finished, I bent over to pick up my morral from behind the register, making sure my butt had enough space so as not to destroy yet another magical potion. All I wanted was to leave. I crossed the boutique as silently and quickly as possible and, turning off the lights behind me, I locked up and hurried out into the evening wind.

I walked and walked, staring at the broken pavement and black gum spots, eager to leave that place far behind. After a few blocks, I began to feel more at peace, making my way through the black streets illuminated with crude lights and neon signs blinking all around, with the bars, the bakeries, the bookstores. When I got to the bus stop, I stood beneath a naked light bulb at a churro booth and, finally exhaling out all the breath I'd been holding, I asked for a two-peso churro, please.

What a day, Dios Santo. What a pinche día. Who would have thought it would be so traumatic to work at a beauty boutique? Although my body had

returned to its regular size, I was still hurting inside and preferred not to think about what had happened. I just wanted to get home so I could take off my pantyhose, the tight shoes, and slip my feet into my favorite pair of tire-soled huaraches, so broken-in and soft. I wanted to put on my apron to help my amá make supper for the kids. I wanted to be standing in the kitchen, in front of the tin comal with hot tortillas in my hands, warming the milk for the little ones to drink from their clay cups. I wanted to kiss my amá on the cheek and hold baby Tavo in my arms.

I suddenly remembered that in my fright and embarrassment, I'd forgotten my pay at work. Imagine that, mi'ja! Híjole, what a dummy! I had to go back for it now, because tomorrow Amá and I had to pay Don Fermín for the beans he let us take on credit. And there was nothing my mother hated more than owing people money.

I didn't want to go back to La Freu Freu, but I didn't have a choice. Well, at least that Doña wouldn't be there and I still had the key to open up. I'd just get my little envelope with my little money and in a flash I'd be on my way home again.

When I arrived at the boutique, everything was dark. All you could see were black silhouettes. That luminous salon of crystals and mirrors and sparkling surfaces was transformed into an opaque space, a puzzle of shadows and weak echoes of streetlights.

As I approached the glass door, I heard a voice coming from inside.

"Arturo, honey. It's just that I don't understand…" It was the voice of la Señora Sanz.

"Arturo, please. I beg you." I froze and held my breath. It was the voice of la Señora, but at the same time, it wasn't. It was somehow different. I had never heard her like that.

"Arturo, please, don't do this to me. For the love of God…"

It wasn't the hard, sharp voice that I knew. This voice was soft, full of pain, and fear too, I think. I heard when she started to cry, and I just didn't know what to do. She cried with sighs that shook out from the depths of her chest. I was afraid to move but I dared to shift my eyes to look inside, and when they adjusted to the kaleidoscope of shadows, I could see her leaning against the counter with the telephone to her ear.

Her meticulous hairdo had tumbled into a fragile chaos over her face. She tried to silence her sobs by biting her lips. The red of her lipstick had crossed her cheek.

"Arturo, no more. I can't take this any more," she implored. "Please…"

Was this really la Señora Sanz? I couldn't believe it. This woman clawing at her hair, her face and chest with so much desperation, was this la Señora Sanz?

"Arturo," she continued. "Arturo, no more. No more. NO MORE! Son of a bitch, no more!!!"

And right then, la Señora went crazy and threw the telephone against a mirror. She swiped her

bony arm across the length of the display case and sent bottles and jars flying.

"You son of a bitch!!!" she screamed, throwing whatever was within her reach until she had flung the very last jar of Ultra-Softening Anti-Cellulite Cream, shattering it to pieces. She let herself fall to the floor with great sobs that shook her entire body. Her hair covered her face as she cradled herself in her own arms. She just cried and cried, lying there. I don't know how long she cried. I decided to leave, without a sound, and go home. I would pick up my pay the next day. Don Fermín could wait a little longer for his money.

I turned away, walking back to the bus stop. I could hear her sobs for a long time as they continued to echo in my mind. I listened until they finally dissolved, joining the lament of a police siren on its slow, persistent way through the emptying streets. And then came the voice of Lola Beltrán, one of her weeping songs floating out a car window, calling down the summer rain from the darkness of the sky.

Essential Workers of the Sonoran Desert and Beyond

Kimi Eisele

The Sonoran Desert is often perceived as a place of scarcity. In actuality, it is the most biodiverse desert on the planet, thanks to its topography and seasonal rainfall patterns, which create habitat for some 3500 plant species, 500 bird species, and 1000 bee species. I started thinking about some of these desert species as essential workers, as overlooked and uncelebrated as the human workers who were delivering the mail, reporting the news, tending to the sick in clinics and hospitals. The phrase "occupational folklife" refers to the culture of workers—what workers say, make, and do within given professions. Listening to workers grants dignity to labor of all kinds.

The coronavirus arrived in earnest in Tucson, where I live, as the spring cool temperatures were melting away to blazing summer days. Getting outside meant leaving the house at 5 a.m. to beat the

heat, listening to bees and doves and trees in the warm winds. As temperatures rose into the hundreds, I hunkered down for a summer that would be the hottest on record. Meanwhile, all those workers were keeping the desert alive and glorious, keeping us safe and healthy.

These paintings first appeared in ANTI/body, a site-specific collaboration between the University of Arizona's Art+Feminism Collective and artist Natalie Brewster Nguyen, involving installation events in multiple locations around Tucson. The installations were viewable from a distance, on foot, or via car and bike. All were accompanied by a soundtrack.

communications workers

Reporters, broadcasters, engineers, technicians, customer service staff, and other communications workers help us access critical health updates and stay connected with each other. In this time of physical distance, connecting via phone, internet, radio, television, and print feels life saving.

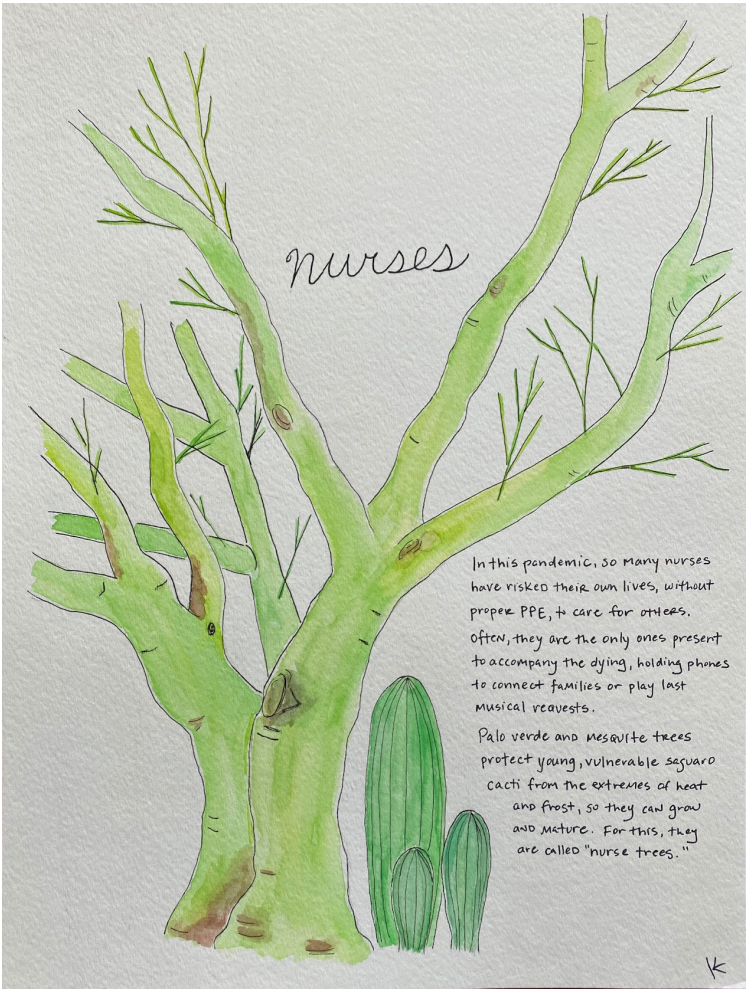
The Northern Mockingbird is famous for its varied, repetetive, and loud songs. The birds were once kept as pets, diminishing their range. But now they are common again filling our days - and nights! - with melodious and (let's be honest) sometimes jarring sounds.

food workers

Food workers of all kinds - agriculture, grocery, restaurant, packing plants - have continued working to ensure the rest of us have access to the food we need. Some of these workers are well cared for by loving bosses, but too many struggle to access PPE and hazard pay, risking their own health to feed us.

Bees play critical roles as pollinators, ensuring the flowering and fruiting of desert plants that feed birds, reptiles, and mammals. They also pollinate nearly 30 percent of agricultural crops, meaning our lives truly depend on these busy, beautiful workers.

K


nurses
In this pandemic, so many nurses have risked their own lives, without proper PPE, to care for others. Often, they are the only ones present to accompany the dying, holding phones to connect families or play last musical requests.
Palo verde and mesquite trees protect young, vulnerable saguaro cacti from the extremes of heat and frost, so they can grow and mature. For this, they are called "nurse trees."
lk

packaging, shipping & delivery workers

Shelter-in-place doesn't apply to these workers, who labor long hours – often for low wages and subpar benefits – to bring us the goods we order.

Companies that employ these workers could learn from more equitable, symbiotic relationships...

like that of the lesser long-nosed bat and flowering cacti and agave species.

This migratory bat follows the plants' flowering cycles, benefitting from rich food sources of nectar and pollen, which it transports and delivers flower to flower, ensuring the continuation of the plants.

K


janitors, cleaners & sanitation workers
These workers keep our homes, worksites, businesses, and public spaces clean, safe, and beautiful. Though they often go ignored, unseen, and certainly underpaid, their work is critical to our well being.
Turkey vultures are often thought of as ugly or "gross" birds. Common across the country, they feed on carrion, eating remains and refuse slowly and thoroughly. They can smell food a mile away and have excellent vision.
By foraging what's no longer alive, they clean the landscape of harmful decay and disease.


artists
Not always considered front line workers, artists nonetheless are working hard to observe, document, respond to, and reflect on this pandemic. What would your days be like right now without books, music, dance, visual art, film, and cultural heritage practices that connect you to your friends, your family, your community, your best self? We turn to art to soothe, celebrate, commemorate, escape, mourn, and liberate. And there is no art without artists.
Coyotes rule the desert with crafty intelligence, playful curiosity, and keen sensitivity. Highly adaptable, they live in every habitat and support each other through social groups.
They appear and disappear when you least expect them...
and they sing to communicate or just for fun.

Malbolge

Douglas Kearney

WHAT SONG

had me a reverie there was a continuum from divinity
to Malbolge, a kind of slumming passage, lined with code—
some elegant as a currawong song, some raw as a grackle's dissonance.
what delicious departures, the passing from one to the next.
what songs those black birds sing.

* * *

stony the bitter road we trod to the chast'ning—
the rod rise high as the song of the steady slaughtered
the weary & silent

let our blood,
let our blood.
lift ev'ry sigh
ev'ry sky watered with tears.

let our blood.

let our blood.

the path stray from our feet,
cast us to gloomy places where we met the chast'ning:
the shadowed world
of the rolling sea.

let our blood.
let our blood.

the world drunk with the wine of it—

* * *

I don't feel like singing no more no more.
how in the heck they gon find my neck if I don't sing no more?
how in the heck I don't feel like singing
no more no more. say what left could my breath be for, be for
if I ain't fixt to sing no more?

I was a bird of a sort of a bird. yes we was.
a bird like a clock, we was full of cog. the cogs
were in us where we hadn't them before,
& I—our own fingers hadn't cogged us inside up,
though. I was not in a cage for a cage takes you out
of the world. yes yes it does. what it does
by way of, in the way a cage comes between birds & the world.
& the world was on me like feathers. pinions pinned into
me being sort of a bird though not in a cage we weren't.
the cogs weren't ours neither
& I don't feel like singing no more.

"then dance" the clock makers said, winding &
minding us to wind, & we wound
lest our feet—
lest our feet—
stray. but
when I don't feel like winding now—

though/so the dissonance strikes like a clock chiming time
like clockwork the cogged heart wound to cry out its hung wooden house—
but I don't feel like telling you what time it is now.

Dear America

Maria Duarte

The air is frozen, my fingertips are purple, the rays of the sun are hot to the touch. I came to this country with an illusion sold to me as the "American Dream." Actually, I did not come here because I wanted to but because my parents believed it was a better country, in which I could study and be my own person without being reproached as an educated woman.

America, what happened? Where have your dreams gone? Why do you prosecute the children of hope? Because that is what we are made of: hope. We hope to be better citizens of the country and better human beings in the world. We hope to have a better life financially, materially, and spiritually. We hope to stroll the sidewalks without fear of being deported. We hope we won't be killed by a stray bullet or the anger of a police officer. We hope to own a house and a car and have a job and

go to school. We hope not to regret the decision to leave a country where being a woman means to be a servant and we know better than to speak up against the corruption of the government. We hope that we won't be kidnapped or raped for wearing a short dress. We hope that we will not be persecuted for who we are.

Where are you going, America? Have you forgotten your promises? Do "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" mean nothing anymore? That is why I am here, to pursue happiness, and yes, happiness is complicated but so is life. America, I have learned your ways more than the ways of my ancestors. I know more about the Fourth of July than Mexican Independence Day, more about George Washington and Abraham Lincoln than Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla and Jose Maria Morelos y Pavon, more about Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson than Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz and Octavio Paz, more about cheeseburgers and pizza than mole or pozole.

America, America, America, what else do you want from me? I have given up a life to have this dream. I have given up a family I have not seen in sixteen years, friends I do not know any longer, even my language because I speak more English now than Spanish. I left my other self behind when I got here. What else do you want me to give?

Tell me, America, I am asking if today will be the day I am taken to a country I do not know. America, I am fearful, frightened in this country where I learned to drive and got my first car, where I took

my first ID photo and did not like it because I was wearing glasses, where I had my first kiss and made love for the first time in all its awkwardness and glory.

I give you my fear, America. Take it from me. Take the mornings I feel every cop is out to catch me, the afternoons when I am driving, worried that an Immigration truck is following, the evenings when I run from the store because the clerk needs only to pick up the phone. Take the nights when I awaken sweating, thinking I should have taken melatonin so as not to dream.

Take the days I ask if this is when my hope dies. Is today the day a knock will fall upon my door? Will I be awakened tonight with flashing lights and screams? Is this the moment my eagerness to be a better student, scholar, citizen, dies in the grip of ICE? Take them all from me, America. I do not want my fears anymore.

Tell me, America, is my soul not enough? My tears? I am a divided individual. I want to belong here because your arms have held me and I have tasted the fruits of hard work. And yet, I carry my ancestors on my skin. I may not know their history but I know where I come from; I know they gave me the spirit to fight.

America, let me give you my divisiveness. Let me give you my doubts. Let me give you my hopelessness. Let me give you my all because you have had it already for more than half my life. You have taught me to take risks, to have compassion, to be kind and see all human beings as equal. America, I

am rooted in Mexico, but I have grown up in California. I am a woman of two worlds.

I am a dreamer because I dream of a better tomorrow. I want to be a voice for those who do not have a voice. I want to be remembered as kind, as caring. And you, America, how do you want to be remembered?

Thank you, America, for giving me an opportunity to walk on the sidewalk freely. For encouraging me to believe that as a woman, I have the right to an opinion, a vote, and a voice concerning my body and my community.

I am a writer, America. I am Latina and an immigrant. I am dependable, able, short, and so, so brown. I speak English and Spanish. I am a lover of animals but also carnivorous. I am a hard worker and also a party animal. I am a coffee lover and a cheese-addicted, pizza-eating monster. Am I still a foreigner, then, when I have grown up in your backyard?

I am writing to you, America, so you can hear me, so you can see that we are all immigrants together. America, you were the first dreamer I knew.

An Essay about Roger

Lynn Melnick

Roger was not the only person I knew in the city with a backyard full of chickens.

Sometimes they'd wander into the backhouse where he kept his studio and scoot close to the futon and crap on the floor. I never saw Roger clean up, but the bird shit always disappeared pretty quickly.

The eggs were delicious. Roger made me eggs often, after I put my clothes back on. Roger made his eggs scrambled in probably too much butter. He didn't have a lot to say to me while I ate.

I am older than Roger was in this story. I am forty-four as I write this. It's not that I don't know what happened to Roger. I wish he could see my body now. It has so much more to communicate. It's begging to be reformed in clay.

Roger sculpted my bust, repeatedly. There were at least a dozen of them. At the end of every session he'd fuck me, sometimes on the worn futon in the backhouse. This was the unspoken yet entirely obligatory part of the job.

He was so impatient, as though sex was a chore. After, I'd look up at the impressive rafters and smoke his fancy cigarettes. After is when he seemed to glow with appreciation for me.

I liked how he'd watch me so closely. He was so old. Sometimes his old art friends would be there.

He'd put cash into my hand as I left, close my fingers around it, and pat my fist.

I don’t remember if my body exists yet outside its capacity to arouse.

I knew a girl named True who was also seventeen and at community college with me. She lived with her parents and they kept chickens. Her parents were hippies. I thought she was better than I was because she had a Volvo and talked to her parents about her sex life. Her parents also made me eggs sometimes, if I'd stayed the night. Theirs were fancier, omelets with goat cheese and sprigs of herbs.

Eggs are a perfect food.

Last year I found myself in the kitchen frying an egg almost in an out-of-body way. I don't know why but I didn't cook eggs between the ages of twenty-two and forty-three. But that morning was different. I even sat at the table to eat. Usually I eat on the couch.

Roger fell between two mistakes, between two slender and troubling bodies. The last six months of the first mistake are vanished from my memory. I don't know why I spent years hoping I'd get them back. Now I never want them back.

My second mistake was only weeks away, though I had resisted it for months. I let True fuck him first and we sat around the hand-carved wood of her kitchen table, talking with her parents about how fucking him was a bit too rough.

My second mistake sometimes lived in a house with no kitchen and a rotting truck in the yard and chickens would wander over from the house next door. Do all chickens look the same to you? They do to me.

This is not an essay about chickens.

The truth is, I don't remember what my body looked like at seventeen.

Eventually, I fucked my second mistake in the shower of that rotten home with no kitchen, and he banged me so hard I couldn't walk and had to rest on a bare mattress on his floor.

I couldn't stop fucking my second mistake. If I had ten minutes between school and work, I'd fuck him. If I'd just fucked him, I'd fuck him again. Once True waited in her Volvo while I ran into the house, leaving the door open, and fucked him on that mattress and ran back out to the car still breathless. Then we went to meet her parents for dinner. True didn't care that we were fucking. She was still fucking him, too. We ate tacos around a picnic table and her mom told us about the Peace Corps.

I tried to keep it a secret, but Roger could tell I was pregnant. He was furious. My breasts were swollen and I winced when he fondled them. I was eighteen and we couldn't remember what my body looked like at seventeen. He couldn't remember if my nipples were always that dark.

I met Roger because I enrolled in a Mexican art class with my friend Elinor whom I had known since elementary school. A lot of the kids I'd grown up with thought I was dead because I'd disappeared from school for so long, but there I was, studying art, because I had surfaced between mistakes.

Elinor and I laughed a lot in class. This is what high school would have been like, I thought.

The textbook was the catalog of a LACMA show. It was very pricey. $60. I thought I could give it to my second mistake as a gift. His mother once gave me a tapestry she'd brought with her from Mexico; she said it was a century old. I ruined it by passing out with a lit cigarette. The burn was waxy. Unsexy. Not the kind of wound you write about.

Roger always had good booze and lots of Valium. He had to keep me still and it's difficult to keep me still. The word he used to describe me was "overflowing."

He told me it was hard to have patience with me. He would get very angry and disappear into the main house. Sometimes he'd come back out and slap my cheek.

Another former classmate, Ethan, was at the college, too, taking photography courses. He was a bit of a skater, a bit of a hippie, and had been well-loved in high school. I followed him around the darkroom for an afternoon, then made out with him on his twin bed in his mom's house. I called Elinor like oh my god, guess what!? and told her all about it, even though it had been kind of uninspiring. This is what high school would have been like, I thought.

Elinor was late with her paper so we went to the art history department to leave it in the teacher's mailbox. That's where I saw a sign tacked up to the board looking for art models. Call Roger, it said. Nudity required.

You sound nervous, he said through the phone, but it's charming. There is a kind of man who finds nervousness a real turn-on. He offered me more money an hour than I had ever gotten in a non-sex job, so I knew there'd be sex.

I am forty-four and still nervous on the phone. I'd more easily take my top off in front of strangers than call them.

If I were left alone, I could be very still. My mind does all the work.

Sitting for Roger was difficult because he was so jumpy and I was usually hungry and horny and thinking about the eggs and the sex. Stillness was suddenly more important than it had ever been, and so it was suddenly harder.

This is not an essay about stillness.

Roger was the second person to assume I wasn't a virgin by how comfortable I was taking my top off. This is not an essay about taking my top off.

I have no idea what Roger's last name was.

This is an essay about Roger.

I felt grown up with Roger. There was nothing boyish about him. I don't remember our first meeting but I think I remember every meeting after that. I'd take the Big Blue Bus to the Palms neighborhood. Every home with chickens I've mentioned was in the Palms neighborhood. My first mistake was in the Palms neighborhood, too. I recall shrubs but no palms, although after a while you stop noticing palm trees. Like after a while you stop noticing the chickens, really, unless they're shitting on your floor.

Like me, palms aren't native to Los Angeles. Like me, palms were planted to beautify the city streets.

Roger was jealous of Ethan, who he only glimpsed once, when Ethan dropped me off outside his house. I don't want to see your young men, he said. Meanwhile, Ethan was mad because I'd called him the wrong name, called him the name of my second mistake when we were making out on top of his car. I felt like I was in a movie about teenagers.

I lost the baby and bled a lot but was madly in love with my second mistake, who'd stopped seeing True or anyone else but me. He told me he loved me and I couldn't resist him any longer.

I couldn't even wait until the bleeding stopped to fuck him again. I came so much with my second mistake that it was impossible to know what a bad idea he was.

My breasts soon went back to their usual size, which pleased Roger, because he had work to do.

I am forty-four now and have carried two babies to term. It was a while ago, so my breasts are, again, back to their usual size.

Dried bits of clay were everywhere on Roger. I found it seductive until I found it disgusting.

All the finished busts of my breasts crowded into a corner of the courtyard. Roger's assistant, whom I never saw, was supposed to pack them up and drive them to a gallery.

Roger invited me to the group show that the busts were in. The gallery was set back from the sidewalk quite a way, on a street just off a wide boulevard, though I don't remember which one. San Vicente? Santa Monica? It was sunny, but it was always sunny.

Lots of adults were there, the women in flowy tunics, everyone drinking wine or water from plastic cups. Roger pretended he didn't know me until he found me in the bathroom and pinched both my nipples, which hurt but the attention made me very happy.

I have no idea if I was attracted to him but I wanted him to be attracted to me.

After the show, Roger had an angry breakdown and smashed one of the busts and smashed my mouth so then it was bleeding. My womb had stopped bleeding. I never went back to Roger. I was even afraid to get the money I was owed. I covered my mouth in lipstick and Ethan didn't notice and Elinor didn't notice and True didn't notice and my second mistake only seemed to kiss me harder.

I didn't know Roger hung himself from the impressive rafters in the backhouse until I ran into his neighbor years later in another city. What happened to all his work? I asked. I'm not sure, was the answer.

I think I thought he was very talented.

I thought of the chickens. What happened to the chickens and all the shit and all those colorful eggs? I asked.

I thought of him swinging and then suddenly not swinging and then suddenly very, very still.

The View from my Screen

Wendy C. Ortiz

1

By the time the stay-at-home orders came down, I had already begun distancing myself. My household became a permanent workspace: office rotations with my partner and a room where my kid could complete fourth grade online. Those first weeks, as people started to arrange themselves as either the Ones with Free Time or the Ones Overworked (Home Edition or the riskier Out in the World Essential Workers Edition), I felt my energy dry up from working on video and having my family around without a break. There were those who made sourdough and those who dove back into their creative projects and posted about it, constantly, online. Meanwhile, people were falling ill. People were dying. I fell into COVID confusion, unable to reconcile the part of me that loved

knowing I must stay at home with the part that had to stay awake, concerned about the crisis and its effects on my community. I typically write daily, two pages in the morning, and that didn't end with the pandemic—but otherwise, I felt estranged from any desire to write. Instead I got interested in other people's projects. If I couldn't write, I could be an audience.

This led me to television. First, two reality shows focused on fashion: *Making the Cut* (reuniting Heidi Klum and Tim Gunn, post-*Project Runway*) and *Next in Fashion* (Tan France offering an amiable connection for fans of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*). These shows got me interested in a free online course called "Fashion as Design," offered by the Museum of Modern Art. All of a sudden, I was reading PDFs and watching short videos about the emergence of the stiletto heel or the jumpsuit. Why do we wear what we wear? asked the PDF. This question both gained and lost importance as I tried to figure out what to wear each day. I thought of all the fantasies, decades' worth, of making my own clothes. Instead of banana bread, maybe I would locate a sewing machine and online classes, and emerge from the pandemic with a closet of new clothes?

In fact, I did not even finish the online class. Why do I wear what I wear? I thought as I dressed my top half to meet clients for Facetime sessions. It took two months to figure out that I could wear the same outfit all week, throwing it into the dryer, if necessary, to refresh. That and some lipstick, which

made me wonder if lipstick might brighten my groundhog days in front of the computer, where I couldn't avoid my own image looking back from the flatness of the screen.

When my kid attended Zoom school and my partner took the office, I made myself comfortable in the TV room. I watched part of a film about the making of a Steely Dan album on a channel that airs only music documentaries; then I switched to *Beat Bobby Flay*. Bobby is a chef with a number of books and TV shows and restaurants, and every episode culminates with him competing against a guest chef to make the guest's signature dish. Three judges do a blind taste test, and we see if the guest can "beat Bobby Flay." Bobby meets every chef with respect, sometimes admiration, and when he loses, as he sometimes does, he warmly congratulates his competitor. The neutral face he wears and his posture, which seems natural, comfortable, and authentic, is appealing. Such a persona, even if a façade, represents one of the few kinds of male energy I want to deal with, ever.

Can it be an artist's process when someone scales a 3,200-foot rock wall without a rope? If that someone is Alex Honnold free climbing El Capitan in *Free Solo*, I think it might. Watching, I took photos of the screen. In a few of them, Hannold appears to be wedged inside a long fissure. The closed captioning reads (heavy breathing). Indeed. I leaned into *Free Solo* at a point when I was analyzing my breathing, noticing any slight twinge in my chest, not long after a night when I was convinced

my body was weathering the dreaded cytokine storm (heavy breathing). Maybe one of the most difficult and singular annoyances of the pandemic is the time spent considering any change in metabolism, any slight heat rippling over the skin, any change from the everyday aches and pains of being an older human. Which is maybe why I have lost hours and hours to television.

2

Not long before the pandemic, I watched *Midsommar*. Back then, I spent most days at home alone. My family was at work and school, and I knew they wouldn't have any interest. (One of them is nine years old and recently flipped out when I tried to screen *Jaws*. It's a classic film, and you loved *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, I said. That same guy is in it. Richard Dreyfuss. And there are funny parts. And the shark does not look real. But she began screaming, hot tears flowing, during the first few minutes as the shark violently attacked the swimming woman. We did not finish *Jaws*. Instead, she was lulled by YouTube and its tween influencers, the queer bizarre of *Steven Universe*, replaying scenes in Gumball over and over again until they loop like earworms in my head.)

As I watched Midsommar, I thought about the Twitter commentary when it came out. I knew that now, no one would want to talk about it, although my partner did listen to me describe the plot.

Then she agreed to watch Hereditary with me. The prevailing feeling I had after both movies was disappointment. Last year, when I watched *The Haunting of Hill House* alone on spring afternoons, curtains drawn, staring down my 46th birthday, I was similarly let down. Such interesting premises, and yet so much left to be desired. I wanted to rewrite the series. I continue to search for horror films that will do what *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Exorcist*, and *Poltergeist* did to me as a child seeing them for the first time.

In the early evenings, when my family would come together from our separate spaces, establishing home as Home again, I counterbalanced some of the horror/pandemic drama by looking for TV we could watch comfortably with our nine-year-old. (This was before we understood that we would be in quarantine until May. And then June. And then July. And then, and then, and then…) My kid happened on a show called *Zoey's Incredible Playlist*. I half-watched until a song made me zero in, and I realized that one of the main characters was Black, queer, and trans. Zoey became a bittersweet kind of comfort cupcake in the evenings, and when we had no episodes, we would turn to Absurd! Planet (I always appreciate the exclamation point), with Afi Ekulona voicing Mother Nature, who in this incarnation is a proud, hilarious, loving mother who wants to showcase the planet's strangest animals.

When I was not watching TV, I was working. When I was not working or watching TV, I was cooking. When I was not doing any of those things, I

was reading or sitting in the backyard, on the one lounge chair we had managed to procure at the beginning of the pandemic before backyard equipment became scarce. Here was another kind of viewing. From my blue chair, I could see an orange tree filled with fruit, some as small and green as tight little limes; a flowering bush, home to many finches; the plumeria that drops white petals that look like mushrooms all over the grass. The mourning doves make their calls, a sound I associate with the bottlebrush and eucalyptus trees from childhood. An overripe orange drops from the tree and every time I am surprised by the thud, how it sounds like a small body hitting the ground. The end. But it is not the end at all. It's the beginning of another story, in which the orange becomes food for ants, beetles, flies, and decomposes into the rich dark shadowed dirt beneath the tree.

An exercise I make myself do is to focus only on what is in my visual frame. This helps when I'm overwhelmed by the news, or when I try to imagine the future. When I am reclining in the turquoise blue lounge chair, I pay attention to the lilies of the Nile, the birds and their stop-motion gestures, their micro-movements and flight patterns I start to catalog. Tomato plants burst out of the garden bed, lolling heavily until they are bound to a wooden trellis that allows them to climb. Silhouettes drift across the grass, reminding me of a scene from a recent dream, seeing shadows fly backward as in a cartoon. The glisten/vanish/glisten/vanish of a spider web that connects the sun umbrella to the

birdfeeder, one long, semi-secret tightrope. The sun belts heat. My backyard is a place of prayer, of grief, a place I've pissed, a place where I've gathered friends and sat at tables and looked at the night sky together. This backyard is a container of hours, like the TV room is a container of hours.

3

I can't call what we were doing with our kid from March until June "homeschooling" when I know actual homeschoolers. Rather, we were tech support and occasional math explainers or consultants lite. To date, she's had more Zoom meetings than I have. Meanwhile, I was deep into *Gentefied*, and my nine-year-old could grasp the content for the most part. We've talked about gentrification—using our neighborhood of West Adams as an example—but this is a smart comedy about Boyle Heights, where my mother was raised and my grandmother lived for my entire childhood.

On Easter, a holiday we observe only to hide chocolates in plastic eggs around the house, we screened *Fried Green Tomatoes*. I texted Myriam Gurba, since many a queer of a certain age recalls this movie fondly.

"An Easter classic!" she replied. Lol. And with that, my household decided that this might be our annual Easter screening, a new tradition.

We also made plans to start screening other movies that we deemed "important" for the child.

When I came across *Mrs. America*, I thought it might be educational, even if we had to sort the historical elements from the fictional. My kid was immediately taken with the opening credits, a colorful animated sequence, 1970s-style, "A Fifth of Beethoven" providing sound theatrics. Explaining the Equal Rights Amendment, Phyllis Schlafly, and Gloria Steinem seemed a good enough extra credit assignment. I may have received some extra credit myself when I showed my kid a photo taken of me with four other women, including Steinem, during my first writing residency at Hedgebrook in 2007.

Around this time, our TV screen began to fill with images of people marching, people gathering, people protesting all over the country. If, like me, you were around for the 1992 Los Angeles uprising, to see Fairfax and Montana Avenues and Pan Pacific Park become sites of protest felt like reconnection of a sort. My kid asked about protests and our experiences. She was hungry for details. She made a list of what she would take to the protests if she could go.

"Something as a shield," she wrote, "rope, lighter, backpack, gas masks." I found some videos on YouTube about the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle, realizing that so much of my protest experience had been pre-cell phone, which means no footage unless we shot it ourselves. I rewatched *If A Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front*, while my kid asked why people were setting up platforms in a forest or plotting arson on empty buildings. The beginnings of many essays formed in my head. De-

pending on the source, my kid is either at the tail end of Generation Z or she is Generation Alpha. In any case, this kid and all the others are enduring a specific experience here in the pandemic that we, their parents and their caregivers, can't begin to comprehend. What my kid knows is this:

Police are not our friends.

The president is not our friend.

Black Lives Matter.

And it's good to make a list and be prepared for when we can safely protest.

4

The first TV show I ever binged was *Six Feet Under*. This was around 2006 or 2007. I would stand over my kitchen sink in Koreatown, staring at the EQUITABLE building framed perfectly in the window, thinking about the character Brenda. The amount of time I spent considering the characters, what they might do, what they had done … it felt as if I thought about them more than about the actual people in my life. *Six Feet Under* became my favorite show. I hadn't yet had anyone close to me die. I was not yet a therapist.

Another favorite show is *The Sopranos*, which is what I'm binging now. There's something retrograde about this, but it's also weirdly comforting. I know the story arcs, after all; I know who dies, even if I don't remember all the details. I know which episodes will make me feel physically ill. But I'm differ-

ent than when I watched it for the first time. Much older, for one thing, but also a parent and a therapist. I've seen people I love die. So in this rewatching, I spend more time looking at the relationship between Tony and his psychiatrist, Dr. Jennifer Melfi, with the benefit of being able to pause, rewind. Scene after scene of male-heavy interactions fill my screen.

I think back to the last time I was in such a territory. It was my second or third time teaching at an arts center in New England, and as was customary, I was invited to a dinner. When I arrived at the restaurant, I realized that I was the last guest. The table was full of men, six of them, all of whom I had just met. I extroverted as gamely as I could as we ordered drinks, oysters, entrees. My history involves a few long-term, male-heavy experiences, even though for the last ten years, I cannot dredge up any memory of inhabiting such a space.

I trace my familiarity with men, or boys, to childhood, riding my bike with Chris, Brian, and Danny, playing *Star Wars* with Kevin, Matchbox cars with Scott, earnestly discussing UFOs with Pablo. I was the only girl in my neighborhood but I didn't think about it much. Later, when every single boy left the neighborhood with their families—white flight from the east San Fernando Valley—I fit myself into another group of boys, some burgeoning men. Across the Valley I flew, most days of my adolescence, toward the garage of boy/men who drunkenly took bong hits between songs they strummed, beat drums to, shouted out. I was the hauler of these

boy/men in my VW van, often the only one with a license that wasn't suspended. My main activities were drinking, smoking weed, listening, observing, until I had rounded the corner to a place where I felt comfortable behaving as they did—spitting beer at someone for a stupid remark, starting a loud intoxicated argument, smoking cigarettes, loitering outside the liquor store. Afterward, I would fly back across the Valley, stopping midway at another house, a rental full of men in their late twenties and early thirties who either had sex with me or barely acknowledged that I was there.

When I think of these scenes now, I see how attractive they were—these men with the ability to live outside the bounds. I went to school, got good grades, had a job through twelfth grade. The boys across the Valley were occupational school dropouts, mostly without jobs, while the men in the middle Valley lived the lives of young dumb bachelors in the 1980s. The Land of Men, I call these spaces in my memory. I lived for a long time in The Land of Men. In the pandemic, however, I have even fewer interactions with men than I did before.

Meanwhile, Tony Soprano and his men parade across my screen. I wonder, as I usually do when confronted with this character, why I find him sexy, a feeling I want to strip out of myself like something I could kill. A virus. There are numerous references throughout the series to the "alpha male" and how Tony fits this archetype. I've had hardly any direct experiences with "alpha males," because I have avoided them. My first were with my father and

my half-brother, the latter of whom very much fit the stereotype, especially in his youth. I remember him taking my father to a Rams game when I was a child, and something happened—my brother drunk and in a fight? This was not uncommon when he went places. I wouldn't come across my next alpha until adolescence: a peripheral figure in the dark garage in Reseda who seemed unlike the boy/men in my crew. This man worked in the porn industry. He was louder, more shrewd, and uninterested in the bullshit the boy/men found compelling. I harbored a private crush on him until I moved to Olympia.

Several years passed until the next alpha presented himself to me on a date; we went to a Thai restaurant and he ordered for both of us. What the fuck? I thought, and let him. Later that night, at the White Horse, he strongly suggested that we drive to Vegas. We were on date number two. Every gesture and move felt calibrated to make me say yes to a road trip at one a.m. When I say "strongly suggested," many women will already understand that he would not leave it alone. He knew I was seeing another man and called him, with sneering vigor, "a wheatgrass-drinking pussy." I laughed loudly, maybe inwardly agreeing. We never went to Vegas, but I thought about him a lot. I think of him now when I see the men on the screen, bulls in a china shop, blockheads with guns and old untreated traumas. So why in the hell would I find Tony Soprano sexy? I asked my partner, who identifies as gay, lesbian, queer: Do you find Tony Soprano sexy? Not James

Gandolfini, but Tony Soprano. She didn't hesitate; she said, yes, she found him sexy and that James Gandolfini was also sexy. Hmmm, I said, and thought about Tony's grin.

In 2018, Robin Green, the only woman to write for *The Sopranos*, published a book. In it, she observes:

> Looking back, I can see that the show might very well have sunk like a stone if, say, the Columbine massacre—in which twelve students and a teacher were shot to death by a couple of asshole seniors at a high school in Jefferson County, Colorado—had taken place the week before the show started airing instead of three months after. The audience most likely would have had no stomach for the violence of The Sopranos; people would probably have been repelled, unable to find any of it funny in the least. In that way, television is a crapshoot, dependent on the zeitgeist.

This is fascinating to read today. I can only stomach the show because I've seen it before, so I know what's coming. But in the years since, we as a country have been inundated with mass shootings, some of them unabashedly racist. That the show's characters are entrenched in white supremacist patriarchal systems for which they take no responsibility, that they are conservative Republicans without ever using the words "conservative" or "Republican," is not surprising—it's disturbingly common.

By the time I reach season six A, Tony is 47, the age I am as I write. From the beginning of the show, he has sought the help of Dr. Melfi for panic

attacks that he later realizes have been lifelong. When I watch these attacks, they look similar to my experiences in the past year and a half with atrial fibrillation, a condition that has developed suddenly in midlife, only I don't lose consciousness. Not yet, anyway. Dr. Melfi encourages Tony to discuss his dreams, and one of the things I appreciate most about *The Sopranos* is the investment in dream images and states of unconsciousness—scenes, sometimes entire episodes—that revolve around nightmares, hallucinations, visions during coma or sleep. In other episodes, I catch a couple of funny coincidences—an actor whose house we once visited with a roasted chicken when he and his wife, who is an acquaintance, welcomed a newborn; a scene where a character is wearing a Delicious Vinyl t-shirt, the label owned in part by our local pizzeria, Delicious Pizza.

In June 2020, the city of Newark took down its Christopher Columbus statue, which played a role in the episode "Christopher." Later in the series, hilariously, the characters are indignant about the portrayal of Italian Americans in the metafictional film Cleaver made by Tony's nephew Christopher. I'd forgotten what Christopher's fate was. I'd also forgotten somehow that Tony, like so many Boomers, went off to the desert to take peyote. I keep thinking of the satisfaction I feel when Tony rages. I've been "dealing with" my own rage for quite some time, because, let me be crystal clear here: I am a rageful person. I'm aware of all the ways I've sublimated my rage over the years. I'm also aware

of all the other sublimations or suppressions that will eventually be revealed to me over time, if I pay attention and live long enough.

But for the sake of this already seeping, spilling essay, let's say that a particular tenor of my rage was activated when we as a country heard a candidate for president brag about grabbing pussies. In the wake of that, I and many others had to contend with unpredictable waves of rawness, vulnerability. The terms of our un-safety were writ large. To put it semi-clinically, we rode the waves of PTSD and old traumas coming to the surface with those words and the lack of action on anyone's part. Imagine that rage compounded by the day. Some of you know.

What are all the ways I'll eventually articulate the rage I feel in 2020? For me, the year began with rage at a publishing industry that reflects white supremacist ideals while paying lip service to watery liberal principles. It began with British tabloids creating salacious gossip about me out of a legitimate argument about how the publishing industry leaves out many voices, particularly those who are not white. Amid this rage, I've burned away a number of acquaintances, friends, and people I thought were allies. I have burned physical objects in the effort to manage my rage. The past couple of years, I've logged over 500 days of meditation, blazed through Pema Chödrön texts, borrowed books with dubious titles that claimed to offer relief from rage. Somatic work. Therapy. No therapy. Walks in the park. Cycling. Crying. So when I watch Tony Soprano rage

at the minutiae of daily life, I feel a particular satisfaction and let myself sink into it, the satisfaction of seeing someone slam around their environment, breaking plaster, sweeping an arm across a cluttered desk without consequence or clean-up.

It's been many years since I've thrown a full glass of water against the floor. It's been many years since I've spit beer at a person who disgusted me. It's been a few years since I had to lock my doors against a person with a knife who jumped out of their car in front of mine because we'd been road raging down Western in the blaring sun. It's been many years since I was in a mosh pit navigating thrashing limbs. It's been many years since I screamed at a man in our living room. It's been many years since a man put his fist into the windshield of his car with me sitting next to him. It's been many years since I drove with two whiskeys and three beers in me. It's been many years since I ran from a man with a baseball bat. It's been many years since I've fantasized about arson of empty buildings. It's been years since I wore a mask and ran from police.

5

My rage, then, might come down to feeling powerless. This pandemic presses on it, a bruise that never leaves, just keeps changing color.

6

Even so, the very slow turn we are collectively making offers something of an antidote. When not watching my big screen, my small screen shows me where the protests are happening, where community care is burgeoning in the debris of late capitalism. The numbers change and we contemplate another stay-at-home order, though I have never left the first one. There are three episodes left of *The Sopranos*. We know how it ends. If they survived the early aughts, Tony and Carmela voted for Trump. They are hating the current look of the country. But the truth is, James Gandolfini is gone, and the smirks of sociopath Tony Soprano are a fiction I'm privileged to contemplate in the house I'm privileged to have. Our jobs keep the television on, keep take-out as an option, and pay for hypothetical future care we might need, whether because of COVID, or atrial fibrillation, or any other malady that might arise. It all feels precarious regardless.

The awareness that this sprawl must end doesn't get me closer—in fact, I might be avoiding an "end" because this experience is not over. I mourn the diminishment of my love for the fragment. The fragment doesn't belong here, my thoughts have been spooling for some time. When feeling strong, safe, contained, I might have a friend over to talk across the picnic table in my backyard. Every day I contemplate endings. The end of capitalism. The end of the ways we went about before. The end of

things I never got to begin. If a fragment were to emerge onto the page, I might think I'm on my way back. Not to a time before, but maybe somewhere new. For now, I unspool.

Three Poems

Chris Abani

Manhood

And that uncle with a look of regret
for what was to come, sang softly, jujuwua. The shuddering moan of blood,
a song to calm the sacrificial, the loss across the river.
The way a dying animal will look at you is seared into me.
We die together and all over again.
And the snaking cane he brought down, like Baal's priests, drew blood,
the prayer is the pause between each lash, that breathily sung word: jujuwua.
You were Elijah gone to heaven to fetch a fire, but what of the witness who cannot turn away?

Terminus

The true epiphany is that beauty happens whether we seek it or not.
A boy may become entranced by his shadow with the dark, with the incessant. Maybe we carry death with us. It sits behind the eyes like a shadow on a lake. Sorrow comes to us like this at the
edge of a sea: an immensity.
I chase my brother across continents, devoutly following in his footsteps trying to find the one who cannot be found, the lost boy who haunts me, almost as if he said:

I will fashion you from your relentless darkness.
Yes, we walk everywhere with our shadows the way Aracelis Girmay's voice hovers between song and
sob as she peels
the lines of poetry from the page.
There is no small measure of pyromania in this, a self-immolation. Sometimes we are blessed with the
night sky,

a leopard, starred and spotted.

Fragrance

Sometimes grief is acceptance
that love has always been inadequate.
Sometimes it's just another day
and the light comes in through the window. And my brother calls about ahunji.
An herb somewhere between thyme and clove, the smell of hunger and satiation at once.
I think of that endless summer of fragrance— smoke from burning Bible pages, the smell
of burned rice sticking to the pan
lifted into elegy by the smell of crushed ahunji.
And blood, coppery and hot, leaking from the cane welts on our bodies.
And I make a joke and he laughs, but it hurts, and he says, stop my ribs— But he uses the Igbo, egara, a
word that opens and closes like a fish's gills,
life and death pulling and pushing.

Chicago, 2020

Steam Tunnels

Anita Felicelli

In the dark, this town comes alive with hot steam. We lift the heavy grates and drop into the steam tunnels in the dead of night, under a cool blanket of faint smog and stars. We are hungry, we are tired. We've settled for the danger of the steam tunnels, never having found love. We are ready to leave this earth, and yet by all accounts, we are still on it. We've sat cross-legged on Telegraph all day, as we have for years, and by twilight, our caps are brimming with loose change and dollar bills. We've stood at the back door of restaurants and bars to receive alms from softhearted waitstaff. Many—enough—have obliged. Lately, we've stolen fruit from the farmers' market.

None of us have been inside the tunnels before, though we've heard about them for years. We have every reason to seek refuge. There has been talk of removing all of us on the streets from the city.

From snatches of conversation, we know something dark and deadly is sweeping the country, but we cannot make out what. We are hiding from the police. We are hiding from our parents who were abusive and controlling and neglectful and cruel, who never thought we were enough as we were. We don't admit it, but we are hiding from ourselves, perhaps most of all.

As we search for open grates on campus, we hear the loud hiss of the sprinklers, the students flirting, the surge of steam coming from underground. We stop by every grate and try to lift each one, but we make it all the way past the libraries to the Life Sciences building without encountering an opening. The Campanile is chiming midnight when the four of us drop into those steam tunnels: Leah and Vedica and Maryam and Jane.

Leah is the tallest and the youngest one, but the softest in her demeanor, the most prone to stooping to make sure she doesn't threaten you. Notwithstanding her apple cheeks, she knows how to say no in a way that makes all of us quake with fear, and she's come by that tone honestly. She hitchhiked all the way from Nevada to the coast because her stepfather was a pervert and her mother, a doormat.

Vedica is small and compact and furious. She ran away from her traditional, conservative Telegu parents who live in Orange County somewhere, but won't get into any details of why she left. Filial duty still runs deep, a river of obligation inside her. What is good about that is she shows us, her

chosen family, the same loyalty. She is the best of us at talking to strangers, at convincing them to drop their change. She wouldn't frighten anyone, it's true, but she can talk you out of the clothes on your back, and that counts for something where we are together.

Maryam is a ukulele player, uncomfortable with asking for money unless she is busking, too. Like it's okay to get money for a heartfelt song, but not for just sitting there. She never says why she left home, but maybe it had to do with music. Nor will she specify what her age is, and she might be the oldest. We can see the lines, deep grooves etched under her haunted eyes.

Jane is a tatted-up redhead wearing a leather jacket that's too bulky for her narrow frame, and we suspect she grew up the wealthiest because she doesn't know how to manage the money we get when it's her turn, and she's angry as a motherfucker on some days, but twice as sweet on most, as if she's used to getting her way and shocked when she doesn't.

One by one, we jump through the grating, hitting a stray stepladder someone has left behind, hitting concrete at the bottom. We wipe ourselves off, our asses already wet and dusty from the puddles. There are a few, the residual sprinkle of rain, or perhaps the condensation of steam meeting the outside air in that small swirl of light, directly under. Darkness. We have flashlights in our knapsacks and we turn them on each other like weapons, laughing.

Beams of light around the space, zigzags, circles of white light.

Should we really do this? Maryam asks, waving the flashlight at the tunnel ahead, her face a cipher of shadows.

Eh, they're searching for the people who stole from the farmers' market and clearing people out of the city, Vedica says. Only a matter of time until they find us, remove us. We can just stay down here a couple days. Her face is utterly dark, so the only thing you can see are the whites of her eyes, which have been sad the entire time we've known her, and the occasional sharp flash of her teeth.

Leah says nothing. Sometimes this means she disapproves but isn't willing to say so.

Jane says, Let's go, you guys, don't be a bunch of fucking pussies. Do I have to take charge of everything? And shame—the sound of chastisement in Jane's voice, the unspoken again, the stride of her combat boots just ahead of us—propels us forward.

We advance deep into the tunnel, further and further, not wanting to lose each other, not wanting to hold hands. At first, the only sound is the sodden rubber soles of our shoes barely scuffling against the damp concrete. Sad, pathetic, lovelorn. We four. But in all that suffocating darkness comes the soft, gentle plucking of the ukulele, Maryam unable to stop playing. She's played for so long, she doesn't need light to play; the playing flows without effort, instinctively, like the chirping of a bird. All the old songs, the songs of nostalgia and sorrow and loneliness flood these tunnels, keeping us com-

pany, like a fifth person. We keep walking through the tunnel, hardly knowing where we're going, and when we remember to look back in the dank, thick air, we can't see where the grate is. There's no light, no float of dust motes beneath starlight, no sparkle of light against puddling concrete, to illuminate any sort of path to go back up into the land of the living.

You're always saying shit like that, Vedica says to Jane unexpectedly, belatedly. Her voice breaks through the steam, like she's walking more purposefully through the tunnels, like she knows where she's going.

Shit like what?

How you do everything. When we all do stuff to contribute. Even Maryam.

Jane snorts.

Why are you picking on me? Maryam asks. The slow calm in her voice, the heat of the steam on our faces are more disturbing than open anger.

I'm sick of it, just so fucking sick of it. She thinks she's better than us, Vedica says.

You know the legend they used to tell me when I first moved out here? Leah says.

What?

A young philosophy professor dragged a student down here fifty years ago and murdered her. She'd confided in her best friend, the guy this professor was mentoring, over drinks earlier in the evening. She told him they were meeting by the Life Sciences building, that she hoped the professor was in love with her. There were love letters. Handwrit-

ten ones. All signed with an initial, never a name, of course. He reported it to the police after he went to check on her and found out from her roommates she never made it back. The professor disappeared after that. They found her body. It was all cut up. Little cuts, a lifetime of little cuts, papercuts and gashes, made in a few hours. She was raped and left to die. They combed these tunnels searching for the professor. Some of the policemen got chemical burns wandering through here. They looked so hard. They kept thinking they saw someone up ahead in the clouds of smoke, but they never caught him.

Fuck, Jane whispers.

And now, there's probably a monster down here.

But why wouldn't he leave the tunnels? Fifty years? Why wouldn't he push up one of the grates and get out? Vedica asks.

Leah's voice is exasperated. I mean. If you want to be all logical about it. Fuck.

The deeper into the tunnel we travel, the worse it smells. The steam floods the passageways, and under our flashlights we can see the whitish billows, the thick clouds in the long tunnels before us, almost a white wall of it. The stench is terrible, sewage or dirty water offset by a chemical odor, a metallic hum, a light top note in all that steam, but we follow the tunnel without much thought. We take turns leading, lighting the way with our flashlights. As we walk, each of our flashlights loses power. The air is stagnant and everywhere, the smell of things incinerating.

Finally, we spot a cone of light, probably beneath a grate, and move toward it, together, still a single breathing thing exhaling in the steam. Our cheeks are hot and wet. Our clothes are thick and wet, sopping with wet heat, a heat that seems to mean something, since we can't shake it. All the mysterious things we never did aboveground seem to be in these vast puffs of steam, their billows in the dark.

Hey, how long do you think we've been down here? Vedica asks.

Couple of hours, maybe?

There is no ladder and we grope around in the dark for something to poke the grate, to push it up. In the corners of the passageways are items, but no matter how much we shine our flashlights about, we can't find a stick, just fragments of litter, leaves.

From far away in the tunnel, there's a break in the steam. Maryam screams first, but she doesn't move. She's still and her screams fill the space, some kind of banshee. Toward us through the white limps a figure, straggling, dark, tattered. We stare for a moment, unable to move. He stops moving, as if he's contemplating what to do.

Run! Jane says in a loud whisper. We grab each other's hands this time, instinctively, none of us wanting to be first or last—the first might feel guilt at escaping, and the last might be killed, and we do not want to change; we have our dynamic down. We take off down the tunnel through which we came, holding fast to each other's sweaty fingers. At first, we're an organism, moving together, navigating the tunnels, our hearts pounding, not sure whose

heart we hear pounding. We glance back, and the figure is following us, in his half limp. We think it's a man, an old man, though we can't see the details of his face in the dark. He's wizened but light on his feet, chasing us with the springy vitality of a younger man. He doesn't make any sound, and we run as fast as we can; we keep running through the tunnels. Perhaps he doesn't want to catch us, but simply wants to make us afraid, and so he follows as we make our way through the tunnels, backtracking toward the grate where we'd entered.

Up there, Maryam says, pointing at a streak of light. That's got to lead up to ground level. It looks like where we came from.

We head towards the light, and when we get there, we push with our palms but the grate won't budge, however strenuously we try.

Here, let me, Jane says.

There's a stepladder, and she climbs up and kicks the grate so hard, the momentum throws her backward, and she falls down on the concrete. Vedica climbs up and starts to feel along the edges of the grate, like she's hoping she can somehow peel open the grate like a soda can tab.

The figure has caught up to us, but stays standing there in the white, steam bathing him, watching us attempt to pry the grate open, as if he knows we'll fail and he's got all the time in the world.

What do you want? Vedica asks. He doesn't answer and she repeats the question.

He doesn't answer, just stands there, looking at us. After a few moments of this, he moves forward again, without speaking.

Run, Jane says again, grabbing for our hands, and we run. We run for what seems like infinity, but is probably just a few hours, fleeing through the tunnels, searching for another beam of light that might signal a grate. We don't remember these tunnels, or we do remember them, but every tunnel is just like every other tunnel, so the memory is meaningless. Every time we think we've gotten to a place we recognize, we realize we don't know it at all, even if it's like the last place. Like is not the same, but the likeness makes us think we should respond the same way. There is the heat, there is the sweat on our necks, the dampness of our clothes, clinging to our skin.

There, Vedica says. And we see it ahead, a glimpse of light, lamplight probably. Lemon-tinted, broken into squares, bounded by shadows as it filters through the grate, a glimpse of the future, in which we escape all this darkness.

Is it the grate we came out of? Vedica asks.

Who cares? We just need to get out of these fucking tunnels, Leah says.

We charge ahead, but the figure pursues us, somehow spry when he wants to be. Perhaps he was holding back just for the pleasure of holding back, knowing he has the advantage, knowing the tunnels better than we know them.

He grabs one of us, we don't know who, and all of us stop as these little wet fingers slip away from us into an everlasting night. We spin around.

He's dragging her into the darkness. It's Maryam and her ukulele. He's dragging her with what we assume is an arm clenched around her neck, pulling her backwards through the dark, striding into the past. How many has he handled this way? She's soundless; maybe he's got her neck clenched too tightly, his force against her windpipe. We hear nothing. At first, it feels inevitable, to all of us. When he paused, it was astonishing, like he could have taken us any of those times, but only now when we're worn out, panting, exhausted, he takes advantage of this moment, to steal Maryam from us. And only Leah has the fight left to run forward, but the figure keeps moving. We follow. There's nothing else to do. None of our flashlights work anymore. They have been out of batteries for a long time. Nothing but the sound of clicking, all of us clicking our flashlights, trying to see her, our feet tapping the ground. We chase this figure as hard as we can, but when we speed up, he speeds up. He anticipates us.

One by one we stop, our throats raw and burning, our eyes tearing up, panting, hunched over in the dark, unable to keep fighting what feels inevitable. We collapse on the floor of that tunnel, not holding hands anymore, unable to breathe, breathing too hard and fast to note it as breathing, more like a persistent rasp, a struggling for life. The figure keeps lurching forward, slowing down, now that we

have stopped running. Maryam disappears without a sound. It's just us, sobbing in the dark. Our only family was each other, and now one of us is gone.

Time passes, too much time to feel, and slowly the silence returns, our breathing quiet, more even, reconciled.

Should we try to find a way out again? Vedica asks, tentatively.

We can't just sit here, crying, can we? Leah jumps up. She's been knocked down more than any of us, we remember. And so we follow suit, getting up again. And we feel less certain, as we hobble through those tunnels, looking over our shoulders, wondering what might lie behind us.

We walk, and we walk, and we walk. It feels like we walk only a few minutes. It feels like we walk years. Underground, we can't measure time, except by how tired we are. When we see the light again, that lemon-tinted spectral force, we move towards it as one, desperate now to leave this inner circle of hell. We are trying to push it open, when we hear behind us the figure approaching again. We sense it before we see it. And he's upon us again. But this time when Jane kicks the grate with the force of terror, we are at her back, holding her up. She pushes through first. Vedica steps on Leah's hand. We reach down for Leah and pull her up, just as the figure reaches into the light from the darkness. We see his hands, old crepe paper hands, bleached oh so pale by lack of light, as they reach into the circle of lamplight.

Get me out, get me out, Leah is screaming, and we pull her into the light by the Life Sciences building. Through the enormous glass wall, we see its enormous dinosaur bones, a resurrection. We look at each other, at the halo of white light around each of our heads, the light radiating off our hair.

What happened to you?

I don't know.

What happened to you?

Our clothes are in tatters, our skin is caked in grime, and our hair is white. We look at each other, aghast, uncertain. We have no answers. We are full of questions, and those questions weigh on our hearts. We slowly cover the hole with the grate we pushed aside and begin walking. The dinosaur is still standing, but the campus looks different. The air is syrupy and hot. The grass is old and brown and faded, like there's been no water for a long time. The sun is coming up, a pale white disk slowly rising in the sky. There are no people, just buildings. We pause by the place where we entered the steam tunnels.

Should we stop at the gym and maybe try to sneak into the showers? Jane asks.

We nod and make our way toward the gym. We don't pass a single person, and when we try the door to the gym, it opens easily. There is nobody there to stop us. Inside, it is pitch black. We take hold of each other's hands again and walk through the eerie quietness toward the empty shower stalls. They're perfectly dry. We feel around in the dark,

running our fingers over the tile to find the faucets. We turn each one. They don't work.

After we leave the silent gym and reach Telegraph Avenue, we look at each other. Nobody on the streets, just one long empty grey street stretching out before us. We walk toward Oakland, looking at each other every once in a while, too frightened to speak.

Where is everyone?

There's nobody, just this long road stretching out before us. We breathe heavily. Our bones are tired, cracking. The sunlight casts three long shadows. There is one missing. We walk and we walk, never encountering a soul, all the storefronts flooded with sunlight, empty of people, just things deteriorating in the sunlight, like a plague has wiped out the people of the city we loved. We walk for miles without speaking, trying to get our bearings, and then one of us whispers, so soft we could choose to miss it, but don't.

Did time pass us by?

Is it past our time?

Yes.

Four Poems

Matthew Zapruder

Peoria

I don't know when that name
entered my ear. I remember
hearing it was where
my father won his first case.
He must have stayed a while,
maybe in the Mark Twain Hotel.
Maybe actual brown bison
watched him from a field,
or a commemorative mug
with facts about megafauna
and the quaternary extinction event.
They still have some in the zoo,
their shaggy mountainous
shoulders permanently
hunched in preemptive defeat.

Each time he returned
from whatever city
he would bring a snow globe
back for her. You could
turn or shake it and see
white flakes far too slowly
descend through some
eternally clear liquid onto
appropriate plastic landmarks.
Among them people stilled
in the act of moving agree
life is elsewhere and the past
by nature misremembered
so they shall stay forever
here and be loved. O happy
shadows of the ordinary.
A collection of plastic
half eggs translucently
covering various mid-sized cities
cherished on a mantle grew.
I don't remember seeing
Peoria, maybe that was before
the first time he had almost
not remembered and with guilty
gratitude stuck the far too
expensive trinket in the pocket
of his overcoat, running
to the plane soon to be filled
with that once ubiquitous smoke.
It flew through undefeated
years of night toward our capital.
I had not yet been born.

Here I've been slowly learning
to speak to those purple flowers
in their language, in which
Peoria means mountainside
hidden in productive shade
between the orchard
and the dream. It's where
they grow. I see the planets
glowing on a wall
above my own son's bed.
The past is always misremembered.
Hold it to your ear. It has
the sweet hum of the superstore
buried inside an apple. You can
almost hear it say be glad
your father never told you
elsewhere, that's where life is.

The Names

Another cloudy day and whatever
combination of faculties and flaws
I need to start another diurnal journey

seems to have been cored out of the brain
I filled this morning with grey
vital thoughts to be instantly forgotten.

I know I owe that man a response
though I am bewildered
and someone I barely know
sent me a small beautiful book
with an owl on the cover

and told me
its force would accompany me everywhere.

I don't know anything about owls
except they are formidable hunters

and not any wiser than the rest of us.
I am overflowing
and if I were able to make a single wish

it would only be for quiet in my mind

which I probably wouldn't like.

No, it would be to remember
the irretrievable names
of three people

on a train moving through a night
full of a language none of us could speak

there would never be another joy like that one
and I can't even picture their faces.

We know from the earliest stories
some deity was always telling a pitiable human

he could not go on without deciding
what every single thing is called

including those little yellow flowers
I can see from my window
but it could not be done

and now it's spring and there are still so many
nameless flowers
that will live and die
without ever having wanted anything.

Poem for Thane

Brother in song
we really did live
on a street named after a bard

I kept looking him up
then forgetting

it felt like he was sleeping
across the street
in the coffin factory

once we took the tour
everything shone
a great amplitude

they were wonderful
those black containers
in that inimitable
nameless shape

one even vermilion
a luscious green lacquer
I still painfully covet

when the guide stopped
we knew he would say

who wants to try

one of us did
it looked
like he grew up

to be that child
who finally knew

what happens
if we give up wanting
to have something to say

we stood there
the low green
hum in our heads

almost said
it's ok
cross the water

Report to the Clouds

1.
We watched a video of spiders
horribly hatching then a butterfly
almost being eaten by a cat
then people filling a hopeful
alley with foreign song

dear vapors you don't care
at all you don't even think
poor creatures
to you we are dead
already feeding the grass
you don't care that there's no escape

to the park for another impractical
lesson about sharing
what belongs to everyone
with young sociopaths or burying
our feet next to the coveted train

are you not even a little bit sad
about the empty tunnel
or Florida's giant palms
impervious in their own shade
Florida malarial land
it's too late to give back to anyone

another text arrives
it says cover our erstwhile faces
I am writing this quickly under
black actuarial clouds
the rain keeps us inside
this house full of books
that almost audibly dream

in the other room letters are scattered
and a torn book about frogs
contains a great solution
outside some brave children
pretend not to be rescued
by the fire police and scream
they will love each other forever

the rain like it has been here
all along arrives
again insisting our door
is also something gray
one more time I read the book
about things that come from eggs
and the mouse chrysalis so rare
it does not even exist

the worst month in history
has not even begun
soon I will reveal my plan
for a theoretical garden
and now it is time to end
this report to you and draw
another distant tree

2.
the swing rests in
quite prolonged
morning darkness

and the lone
shoe just like tomorrow
will not leave its environs

the wooden fence
watches
an animal
watch the warm
fortunate
light
of our home
and shiver

the trees
in the yard
almost say

we know it feels
like everyone
else is dying
but you are too

3.
Children reading
endless linked stories
on the grey couch faded

by light through a previous window
can see the green park
as if climbing

down the concrete slide
an abandoned truck
in one hand then hurtling up

the chipped blue ladder
instead of this couch
waiting for some god

to come and say now it's safe
to walk through the finally
harmless air.

My son can almost
but not yet say he is tired
of being so loved.

I gave him some sand
with tiny magnets in it.
He made a structure

then sang tower
to the skies
quietly, into his hand.

Shelter

Emily Rapp Black and Lisa Glatt

In high school, I wore my father's old suits. I tied the waists with rope or tights, and wore a tube top underneath jackets that fell to my knees. I wore hats decorated with feathers and antique brooches. Around my neck I looped several massive metal crosses from the thrift store that felt heavy at the end of the day; it was a relief to take them off. In this outfit, my skinny body and my wooden leg were entirely cocooned; I was a hanger for cheap fabric in shades of gray and blue and black. I perfected my walk, my gait, and the only time you could really see the difference was when I was sitting down, the knee like a doorknob that I turned only when necessary—when the leg was strapped on, and when it was strapped off—as if it were a door to some room I refused to enter out of fear and disgust. I couldn't tell. You'd never know. Oh, I loved these comments

because I heard: You're just like us. There is space in the world for you.

*

I was in my late twenties, living with my mom in her apartment on the beach. She was the person I loved most and she had been diagnosed with a breast cancer that would eventually kill her. I was, after a couple years of graduate school and being alone, ravenous; I wanted a body to touch my body. A few times a week, I'd leave my mom's apartment and sit on a bar stool at the Reno Room with my saddest friend. We'd drink too much, beer after beer, vodka and more vodka, splash after splash of cranberry juice. The squeezed lime wedges piled up and were swept away by a pretty bartender who'd confided that she used to drink like we did, but not anymore. Sometimes I'd black out. I had mastered being blackout drunk and was strangely careful. It was reported by sober friends that I didn't stumble or slur in such a state—that I seemed, to them, more sober than I was. The inebriation, the obliteration of self and memory was deliberate, as was the anonymity of the sex itself. And in the dark with a stranger, I maneuvered my body in bed so that my leg was unseen. Around his back, good leg first, then bad leg over good leg, so that my plastic brace didn't touch his flesh. The next morning, I had no memory of our conversation, if there was any, no memory of his gestures or face. But throughout the day, tiny clips of one stubborn image would appear:

me with my legs wrapped around his back. I stir-fried chicken and vegetables for my mom and the image appeared. We watched the news together and the image appeared. We played Scrabble and there it was, too: my legs wrapped, careful pretzel-girl, sneaky woman, how I'd spared him my most secret damage and full name.

*

Listen to me, Emily, the youth pastor said. We were alone in his hotel room, and he had just given our group of teenagers a lecture about sex. Essentially: Don't have it until you're married, and then be sure to leave a chair for Jesus. To illustrate his point, he took the chair from the desk and put it in the center of the room. I sat in it now, in the space for Jesus, nervous and embarrassed for being held back while the rest of the kids on our ski trip tumbled into someone's hotel room and sang along to bad Christian rock music, full of lust and unrequited longings. You're a pretty girl, he said—I waited for the but, but first there was an and—and you are smart. I said nothing; his sermons were the stupidest things I'd ever heard in my life, and I'd been going to church every Sunday for all of my fourteen years. It's very unlikely, he said, that intimacy will be an issue for you. People are afraid of difference. I immediately thought of the "special kids" who were marched to a small room at the end of the hallway in my elementary school. The retard room, people called it, and once I punched someone in the face

for saying it, and had to visit the principal and then write an apology letter to the boy that my father made me hand-deliver to his house. My whole body began to boil. I knew he was telling me that nobody would desire me or have sex with me (with Jesus as a witness to my deflowering or otherwise), but I knew he was wrong. I nodded, indicating that I understood, looked at his puffy face and thought, I'll show you. And I did. So many men, known and unknown; sometimes, when I was sneaking out of an apartment or a tent or a duplex in the predawn chill, my underwear balled up in one hand, I'd think about the line of the special kids walking down that dimly lit hallway, preparing to be shut away. I would never be cloistered, never like that.

*

There wasn't a room for me in that little house on Rose Street, so my mom turned the dining area into my bedroom. I was a girl—ten, eleven, twelve, and thirteen—in that tiny space without a closet. It was a room off the living room, not a proper bedroom at all and I still couldn't walk on my own—was in a cast again or a brace again or swinging my body from a pair of crutches again. My best friend's mom was an interior designer, or so she claimed, and my mom listened to her questionable judgment. I remember a houndstooth corner sofa in the living room that doubled as a bed and, in my

room that wasn't quite a room, bright orange and yellow plaid wallpaper on my walls.

My stepfather was my favorite man before he became my least favorite man. Early on, he taught me what it was to be assertive and a feminist—things I'd need later to protect myself from him. My mom married him just after my accident, just after the car hit me. I had mostly recovered except for my leg, which would continue to puzzle the doctors for nearly a decade. My stepdad was compassionate before he was terrible. He was a college student at the time, studying psychology at the university where I'm now a professor. I was seven when he invited me to his speech class and interviewed me about the accident, asked me to describe my feelings. What was it like to be different now, he wanted to know.

I understood, even then, that the beating was about having rejected him. I'd come to their bedroom just days earlier and asked him for a ride to school. I was starting ninth grade. My mom was already at work, teaching kids in Compton about the three branches of government. I knocked and he told me to come in. I stood in the door with just my face in view. "I need a ride," I said. "What I want to do is make love to you," he said. I swung away from him on my crutches, moving down the hall and out the front door and struggling to school. I remember the long streets and the heavy high school books strategically placed between the crook of my arm and the crutch itself.

I told my mom, but he denied it. "I told Lisa that what I wanted to do was make love to you," he insisted. She tried to believe him.

One evening, just days later, they returned from a basketball game that was televised. I was sitting on that houndstooth sofa, watching my favorite show, a drama called James at Fifteen, and it was a particularly dramatic moment. My stepdad rushed in and changed the channel, wanting to see if he'd made it on TV when the camera scanned the crowd. I protested but he ignored me, so I grabbed my crutches and stormed away. I believe it was the slamming of my bedroom door that brought him to me—an angry man flying down the hall.

I was on my bed when he slapped me first, and then again, and again. I hate you, I said calmly, holding my face high in defiance. When my mom rushed in to protect me, he turned and pushed her away. She fell to her knees. I remember her small body huddled against the wall, in the exact spot where a closet might have been.

*

When I left my first husband in Texas, still in my twenties, I used to turn on my phone after poetry workshop and listen to his messages, which were variations on a similar theme, with the words life and fuck and kill rearranged like furniture in a smelly apartment, which is what I was now living in. I gave up my whole life for you, and I'm going to fucking kill you. I had escaped him, was sleep-

ing on a mattress on the floor that belonged to a guy called Bill, who had a subscription to The New Yorker and one lonely suit hanging in an otherwise empty closet. My mom sent candles in the mail and said, Light these, it's going to be fine! My dog, an eight-year-old Saint Bernard/Lab mix, slept against the inside of the front door and growled at the kids who ran past. Their mothers shouted behind them as they lugged huge baskets to the always crowded communal laundry room where telenovelas played on constant repeat from a small television. A man leaves a woman, a woman leaves a man, they fight, they make up, someone dies. The plots were not encouraging.

What my young husband had given up, I didn't know: he wanted to be a minister, had trained to be one, but smoked weed before youth group and drank six-packs of Shiner Bock in the back room of our rental house along the river. I was terribly lonely. A friend asked if I would watch a stray dog, Bandit, who had been found at a house in Houston, shivering in the rain against a fence. He's an older dog, she warned, and I thought good because youth had done me few favors. When Bandit arrived, a black and white smelly beast of a boy, he had a blind and leaking eye, worms, an infection in his mouth, incontinence that meant he needed to wear a diaper. Later, an x-ray revealed a gunshot wound to his chest, a tiny anomaly—a dark spot—on the screen. I thought of my surgeon slapping a sheet on the bright board, year after year, revealing the asymmetry of my bones, the strange curvatures

of my spine, the missing parts that registered as blackness in the body lit from within. I've got you, old guy, I said, and I called my friend and said I would keep him, and he didn't leave my side for the last five years of his life.

The day I told my husband to move out, he lifted a stuffed dresser on his back and, straining under the weight, barreled out the back door and through the garage. He drove away in his truck, weeping loudly, but when I returned to the room he had just cleaned out, I stretched out on the floor and fell immediately to sleep. No more waking up with him on top of me, yelling at me, inside of me; he would never again rage at me, or slap me, or demean me in front of other people. Despite the threats, I felt strong on the floor, alone, listening to bugs pulse in the live oaks outside the window. Years later, after the end of another wrong turn down the aisle, I would be the one to lift an empty dresser on my back, move it three flights down, and out the door. But when I drove away, I didn't cry.

During the last year of Bandit's life, I lived on Cape Cod, in the winter, when the waves were frozen into solid sculptures like a freeze-time photo of the apocalypse. The writer's colony where I stayed was shrouded in white, and we moved between the computer lab and our small cabins through tunnels of snow. When the weather cleared and it was spring, I took Bandit for a walk on Herring Cove beach, a wide swoop of sandy white, seaweed-covered glory with sunsets of blue and yellow and

green and gold, melting into the rim of the world. Next stop, Ireland, we used to say.

I knew it would be a struggle for Bandit to make it back up the ladder that led us down to the prettiest part of the beach, but we were on a doggie date with a friend, and I didn't want him to be left out. On the way back, I followed my friend and his young, spry dog, then stood at the top of the ladder to see my dog, bereft, below. He barked. I said, You can do it! He whined and looked around with his one good eye, as if for another passage, but there was only this one single way. Bandit began his slow, arthritic, terrified ascent. I didn't realize how hard it would be for him to get to me, and when he stopped halfway up the ladder, I started to cry. He weighed 80 pounds, and I wasn't sure I could lift him from this vantage point. The ladder was rickety and his paws trembled. I could see his heart lifting and lowering his chest. He whined, barked, and then he bounded up the ladder into my lap, heaving with the effort of return. With the help of my friend, I picked him up and carried him on my back all the way to the car, It was not a long distance, but long enough, and his breath never slowed but stayed quick and labored in my ear, part panic, part relief.

Four Poems

Victoria Chang

Thanks

Some days I can't see
beyond the two small lemons
as they pull down the branches.

Turning

My mother is dead.
The lemons still turn yellow,
the trout still stare emptily,
desire is still free.
We still love many people,
eat peaches as if kissing.

Dusk in Winter

Everything is blue.
If we mend dusk, then morning
may never arrive.
At this time of day, it's hard
to tell the difference
between a rook and a star.
Snow melts on the rook's
leg. A poem is the rook's leg
only after touching snow.

Rain at Night

To be the last drop
of rain each night is sadness.
It shuts the last door and jumps.

Genesis, Covid.19

Andrés Neuman

Translated from the Spanish by Ilan Stavans

And the Pope said amen in the empty square
and no one answered from the clouds
and no one answered from the mirror
because all voices were beneath the ground
sweetly cradled to cease existence.

And the Stock Exchange swelled its lung
and counted the oxygen in coins
and rerouted its wind toward some islands
sewn to the sea with sutured wounds
only for lizards and exceptions.

And all countries became one
but specially themselves
since many needed to choose
between virus and bread and a few saved
a piece of future in the freezer.

And supermarkets were crowded
with animals in search of animals
with families in white that grazed
in a field of alcohol paper and plastic
and gloves keying the fear code.

And each hospital became tempest
and roofs rained and doors flew
and the thread of life became clear-cut
and truth came and went in hallways
without being asked any questions.

And grandparents could see
with skin like fishing nets
and hands stained with memory
and eyes blinded by lucidity
their rights turn into numbers.

And technology was flesh
in those who already had it and ghost
in those with only body
and we sang rhyming songs
promising never to forget.

And very soon our voices went quiet
in the usual places in multiple corners
with a fly's buzz in that devil's limbo
which is the border between song and silence
between mourning and amnesia.

Granada, Spain | March 27, 2020

My Father's Badge and Gun

Natashia Deón

On June 17, I proposed a new law. By "proposed," I mean I posted to Facebook in the middle of the night while grieving another police shooting in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd. I may have been drinking. I wrote: "Officers may not carry out the death penalty on the street for any crime without a trial. This applies to 'runners'—those who run from the police—and to those who are combative. Non-lethal force is permitted and working body cameras are required. The penalty for failure is first-degree murder."

My actions were sloppy. My words were not. They seemed to make common sense, even in my unsteady condition. By morning, I'd develop the proposal for endarrestexecutions.com.

What I wanted was to imagine a way to stabilize the relationship between law enforcement and the community while protecting the lives of untried civilians. I also wanted to protect the lives of officers and re-establish a sense of deserved respect

for their work. Our dysfunctional society, after all, is still a family, whether we like one another or not. We're in this together.

My father was a Black man and a thirty-plus-year veteran of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. As a child, I always wanted him to come home safely. I wanted my brothers and cousins who were Black and Brown to come home safely, too. These two desires have never been contradictory to me, not even now.

In 2017, my father died suddenly, and I was sure that he'd been murdered. When a loved one's life ends in the presence of a single witness whose story doesn't add up, it often comes to this.

My father was reported to be unresponsive by a friend from whom he'd been estranged. This person said my father had been standing and talking, then suddenly collapsed. When my father arrived at the hospital about fifteen minutes after 911 was called, his body temperature was 91 degrees. The doctor told me this was irregular because a person's temperature drops about one degree per hour after the heart stops.

I wanted an autopsy.

Had my father been shot or stabbed or had obvious bodily trauma—or had I been able to gather the necessary evidence—police might have concluded there was foul play. As it was, the county wouldn't foot the bill for an autopsy to prove his distraught daughter's suspicion.

Had I been able to pay $2,500 for an independent autopsy. Had the crowd-funding campaign for

his burial raised more than $500. Had I not laugh-cried when I read his pre-planned funeral request for limos and music but "no organs to be played anywhere at my service!"

Had I not plain-cried on the phone with someone I loved who called me foul names while demanding an organ and I couldn't comfort her by saying yes. Had I not been weak.

Had I not been battling his friends and churches and conflicting opinions while planning a funeral that stretched from Los Angeles into Riverside County in accordance with his wishes to be interned honorably with his fellow veterans in the National Cemetery, it might have been different.

Had I not had excuses.

Death is a dirty business. But maybe our excuses—legitimate or otherwise—don't free us from consequence or liability. I live with uncertainty. I'll share the worst:

For days after my father was brought to the hospital, he lay in a medically induced coma, brain dead (although we didn't know that yet). As this was going on, a number of disturbing events also took place, including a break-in at his house. I called the Sheriff's Department and told the officers that my father's badge and gun were gone.

"Are you sure you want to report his badge and gun missing?" a deputy responded. "If we pull someone over in your dad's vehicle with this 'gun and badge missing' report, it could be a poor outcome."

I don't know how long I stood there, considering. We were talking about my father's murderer, perhaps. How sure did I have to be? Is it beyond a reasonable doubt on the streets, too? Trauma can leave our memories incomplete. So I told the investigating officer, "He must have misplaced them."

Eventually I'd hire a private investigator, but he never recovered anything.

At my father's burial, two servicemen raised their bugles and played "Taps." Hundreds of people came to pay tribute, those he'd helped and loved and coached and protected. They included people from the disabled and AIDS communities, as well as his cross-country running team, adults he'd coached as kids over decades in basketball and track, Black Sheriff's deputies, church members, relatives and friends. They surrounded my family in such a way that we felt protected. We were united.

As a society that strives for safety, health, prosperity, and liberty, we must take care that in our fear, our grief—our emotions—we do not become the monsters we are taught to guard against; dangerous people who rob others of their lives.

Let me be clear, there are depraved killers among us. Those who can't see the value of another human life. But we are capable of a just and civil society, one where even monsters are tried. If not, we're no better than the violent criminals we say we pursue, our inaction is like lying in wait.

It will happen again.

The bottom line is "helpers" should not be murderers, nor should we empower them to be. This is not an unreasonable ask. Stop killing us.

In Memory of John M. Harris, Jr., father, hero.

On Time

Liska Jacobs

It seems always to be ninety degrees, thunderclouds building up behind the San Gabriel Mountains, which are pink or purple in the distance. Pasadena summers are long and suffocating. My husband and I eat outside because it's cooler on the driveway than it is in the apartment. We sit in folding chairs beside our car, beneath a large disheveled oak, drinking cheap French white wines and eating a salad my sister made for us when last she visited: lots of arugula, parmesan cheese, toasted almonds, fresh buttered peas with a dressing of mostly garlic, olive oil, and a little balsamic vinegar.

We are waiting for the sun to set, when the palms along Holliston Avenue will turn blue and the Summer Triangle will appear in the night sky: Altair and Deneb at its base, Vega, that blue-tinged white star, at its peak. Together, they make up an approximate right triangle cutting through the Milky Way.

While we wait, my husband reads aloud from *The Nature of Time* by the mathematician Raymond Flood. Are you listening? he asks, and when I say yes, he continues: You can directly experience the immediate past, but not either the future or the distant past.

Can that be true? We are coming up on six years in our Pasadena apartment. I try to think how I might one day remember it: the neighbors with their thin, muted smiles, how they never show their teeth. Yes, hello, we're eating outside again. Isn't it hot? And how at night we can hear their intimate sounds: snoring, jerking off, one neighbor clearing his throat, phones dropping, alarms ringing—on weekends, blenders for margaritas. There are babies on either side, one of those yappy dogs making a fuss over squirrels, the mocking and scrub jays—and don't forget the raccoons and cats who prowl, making a fuss in the dark, dark night.

My husband tells me to pay attention.

The amygdala, he's reading now, is an almond-shaped structure deep in the base of the brain. It creates those visceral memories. He taps his head.

I nod, make a sound that means I'm interested—mmhmm.

The first stars begin to show themselves. Vega will be the brightest until the moon rises later tonight. It will be a supermoon, and it will rise in the east and turn red from a partial lunar eclipse. I remember my first moonrise, or at least I think I do. I tell my amygdala to work harder: I'm somewhere dark enough for the heavens to be exposed completely,

and young enough to think that if I were just a bit taller I could reach out and touch the stars. Maybe six or seven, and I'm in the back of a truck, the night sky—a desert scene—the moon rising large enough to crush the horizon. I've seen the moon rise since, but never as large, never as otherworldly.

I asked my parents once about this memory and they agreed we were in Agua Dulce for the Perseid meteor shower, but neither could remember who owned the truck. My father claimed it was his; my mother said he never had one. How could something that at one time was a decided fact be, twenty-five years later, up for debate?

My husband has paused long enough for me to notice. He's frowning at his computer screen. Time does not exist without events, he says, and looks at me with significance. So if there are no events to fill it up, you won't remember—it will just slip away. He makes a motion with his hand.

What a terrifying thought, especially now, in this year when time seems to be at a standstill and yet cranking fast. Wasn't it just March? Maybe it still is. I've been head down, willing days and weeks, entire months to pass. Marching to some unknown date when I can look up and recognize the world again.

But I don't want to forget any of it. Not really. Time has swallowed so much already. Our past apartments have grown fuzzy, most of our neighbors faceless. The couple who moved back to Ohio? That was Mar Vista, where we sometimes drank on the porch together. She played piano, and on lazy afternoons, it was Chopin's Nocturnes. All

the windows open because there was no air conditioning.

When did we live there? Between 2007 and 2012—something like that. It was before Pasadena, back when I worked at the Getty. Or no, that overlapped with living in Westwood, when I was still in school at UCLA.

And before Westwood, there was the place in Mid-City, where an old man smoked fish on his balcony. I knew his name at one time. The neighbor above us, a private eye, let her dog shit outside our bedroom window—but here, I'm embellishing where the memory slips. Was it her dog? I can't remember. But there was definitely, maybe, a dog.

Think of them viscerally, work that amygdala: Mar Vista with its pale blues and cream because the marina is nearby, because the breeze is salty and the days are bright—the kind of bright white sails make on a blue, blue sea. All I can recall of Mid-City is the smell of dog shit, the fresh cut lawns, and bus exhaust.

Was Mid-City our first married apartment? It must have been because when we married, I had just been diagnosed with degenerative disc disease—and I remember driving home from the doctor, his words still ringing loud. It's degenerative, it's pain, push through it, and me thinking, when I get home, I'll drown myself in the tub—and that has to be Mid-City because it was the only apartment with a good-sized bathtub. That was back when I took the 305 bus to UCLA, passing Cedars-Sinai, where I was born—back when I would take one Vicodin for

the back pain and another because I hadn't gone far enough away from where I started.

What year was that, 2006? And what about before that? There were the six or so months in Boston, living with a group of girls in Roxbury Crossing. The biting cold, the twisting colored leaves—hot drinks and afternoons working in the Museum of Fine Art. I remember entering through an underground passage, where an Egyptian tomb sat in the dark, damp hallway. Nothing protected it. I could reach out and touch the crumbling rock, the carved face of someone so long dead.

There were years at community colleges, traveling the 23 freeway, farmland on either side—matchstick dry so that in the fall, the hills glowed amber and ash fell on car windows, laid thick across my mom's potted hydrangeas. My husband and I were only dating then, and we stayed at my father's house until we didn't because he was a sad alcoholic. Because too many times he came home drunk and we found him crying on the kitchen floor, face or hands bleeding, something lying broken on the floor beside him. And then there was living at my mom's—and also, briefly, at his parents, but they made us sleep in separate rooms.

And don't forget the years before my husband: rehab in Port Hueneme, the plastic beds, bedrooms pastel pink and green, the men much, much older, all wanting a piece. Those pre-dawn mornings when I had the first cigarette of the day, the sky turning white and then blue, the smell of the sea almost repulsive in the heat. Was it summer? No, because

I was supposed to be in school. I was missing senior year. High school is wrapped in a cloud of drugs. Days, sometimes weeks, just lost. Waking up in someone's bed, Oh, good morning, what's your name? House parties, always at night, always somewhere close to the Santa Monica Mountains, so you could smell the chaparral, the sage, hear the coyotes. In junior high, my parents fight—let's skip all that, but no—I have to remember, otherwise it's lost. Like 2020, every moment willed over and done with. Remember the broken dishes, the slammed doors. Threats of violence, accusations of infidelity, and finally a divorce that takes almost as long to complete as their marriage. Humans are very good at tearing each other apart.

Before that was the Valley, my childhood: elementary school, the blacktop just as hot in the summer as it was in winter. Remember playing handball with the handsome P.E. teacher? I skinned my knee and he carried me across the blacktop—in my memory, it was acres and acres, and all the other students stopped to watch me get carried like some ailing princess. Is this a real memory? Or is it like the desert moonrise, something made soft by time, and a bit brighter from imagination?

I remember being Citizen of the Month, that I was in a special program for gifted kids, that the library was small and pencil shavings got all over everything. I was once the Tin Man in a play—my hat an upside down funnel covered in foil, me in a silver bodysuit, singing. In the nurse's office there were plastic beds, and if you were sick, you could

lie down and the nurse would close the curtains and let you sleep. How often I pretended to be sick.

Now it's getting hard: a house with a rose garden. We had geese that were not friendly. One Christmas we cooked a goose—Dad hacking through the neck, bloody feathers everywhere. Who cleaned up? Mom probably. Pretty pastel shoes with tiny gold buckles, my baby sister being born—taking afternoon naps—a faint mobile. My twin and I must have been brought home in early April from Cedars-Sinai, the same hospital I will later ride past on the 305 bus.

Timelines, my husband is saying now. I hear the word artifice and construct but I'm ignoring him. Superficial, he's insisting.

Where does time go? Back to Pasadena, to this endless year, this hot summer that has been like all the others in Los Angeles. We tell ourselves to be patient, wash your hands, wear a mask. Next month, after November, in the New Year. Time slipping by as a means to cope. After summer, it will cool down. Don't worry, spring will bring rain. Next winter already planned out. We'll travel abroad in 2022. Whole years, lost. Reductionism, comes my husband's voice.

I've missed his final point, but the article has ended. He's shut his computer, refilled our glasses. Above us is the Summer Triangle, Vega pulsing like a tiny rhinestone. I want to ask how we will remember this moment, because it is happening now—gone too quickly. There is nothing to make it special, to make it last.

Light from Vega, my husband says, takes 25.6 years to reach Earth.

We watch it for a moment, in our folding chairs out on the driveway, drinking French white wine that I will remember as Sancerre. There are crickets somewhere in the dark, their forlorn violin plucking up to meet the moon. It is just beginning to shine.

Three Poems

Susan Terris

In the Mirror, I Am Right-Handed

Staring at me: two twelve-toed leopards, one striped,
one spotted, hunkered under the hull of an upturned
dory. Their unblinking amber cat eyes watch for

signs of midnight-danger. Suspicion is contagious.
Why are they here, and what do they want?
Why two? Leopards are usually solitary, as am I,

and the waxing moon overhead keeps reminding
me again, I don't have to be whole to shine.
Still, the shine I see is four amber eyes, yet the cats

are strange now. They have only one body but two

heads are covered not in fur but in calico.

Are they waiting, not for me, but for a gingham dog?

No, it must be for the owl, and they wish to set out

in his pea-green boat. So what happens when

I, or anyone, mistrusts reality? Today at daybreak,

the mirror showed me thirty-three, yet tonight—

the mirrored lake reflects me as if I'm old,

and the owl has flown to zap vole or songbirds,

so I flip the dory but find no leopards, only clawprints

and not my younger self either. As I oar alone

through the pooling-light, the moon—no, not the moon,

but my dead father, who taught me to write and row—

keeps saying, *Leftie, whatever you do, keep on trying to shine. . . .*

Such Stuff As Dreams Are Made On

There's nothing under my skin but light. Eerie light,
rough like the moon on my ceiling that glowed in the dark

when I was a girl. If I say this light is cold, will you admit
its craters as well as its glow? In a chilly bed, I'm alone here,

and the mercury thermometer under my tongue will only
admit to 96.7°. What I'd imagined before house arrest

this viral year was—at the door—the arrival of my hot
Will-'O-the-Wisp hefting his backpack and cherrywood lute.

With a birthday coming, I'd planned for apples and honey
and madeleines, his hands to warm my feet, my body,

make that odd light beneath my skin pulse with his heat.
But the honey has crystalized, apple is wrinkly as my face,

the madeleines now fluted stone. No dream, only reality.

Doors locked. Windows all shuttered. The light under my skin

grows faint, but I fold my arms tight across my chest, rocking,

rocking, chanting to that uncertain beam, unwilling to let it

sputter as I sit in bed still rocking, humming now, unwilling

to stop, afraid to fall asleep and let it die before I wake.

Kayak in the Time of Covid

Don't laugh, please. But notice the children cancel me
when I explain that the kayak is impartial. It doesn't care

if the lake is mirror-smooth or a wild gyration of white caps
and isn't daunted going upstream in an unknown river.

It understands buoyancy and accepts without question
the command of the paddle. If the paddle rests, it's free to

pick its own path. Can rock, spin, follow the wind, even
beach itself. This one is tough yellow plastic made in Maine

and sold by L.L. Bean. Though old, it still has the strength
of youth. It's not jealous, doesn't argue with time or guide.

I might consider it my friend, yet it doesn't yield to me
more than to anyone who sits inside. Yes, I tell the children,

I love it, even if it merely tolerates who I am. In this sad,

unpredictable world, though, the kayak doesn't challenge,

balk, stage temper tantrums, break any rules, yet she offers each day her own quiet and reassuring consolation.

Helicopter

Karen E. Bender

The helicopter was large, thick and brutal in a military way, with a curved brown window so dark the pilot could not be seen. It was veering, with its deep guttural sound, toward our apartment building. I thought the helicopter would fly over the building, it would move on to its various duties, but it was coming closer to my apartment, yes, closer—and then the helicopter was hovering right beside my window, here.

There was nothing between me and the helicopter but a pane of glass, which seemed now extremely thin. Too thin, really. We were separated by nothing but tender restraint and breath. I waited for the helicopter to crash through the window, shattering everything, that would be a natural course of events; the helicopter had that hulking potential.

My bedroom was not very clean, which perhaps said something about me. I was alone and I did not

know where my wallet was, my ID. Where was my ID? It seemed important to have it. How could I board a helicopter without it? I was naked and unknown. The cats sat on the bed; one sweetly licked the other on the head. It could have been love or perhaps it was a trace of cat food; it was impossible to tell. How happy they were over nothing, their happiness innocent and extravagant, strewn like glossy pink petals on the bed. The helicopter glimmered, very still, as though parked on an invisible parking lot, and its blades whirred so fiercely they blurred; the vibrations they made, on the other side of the thin window, trembled within my body, through my neck.

I did not know why the helicopter had picked this moment to stop by my window. I was naked; I did not want whoever was there to see that. Or perhaps I would give them a surprise. The previous night, I'd had an orgasm so strong, I felt now the stirrings of my period, or what was left of it these days. It was as though my uterus was yelling, a final yell. I could not hear it, but the sound it would make would be glorious. I pulled the sheets around me as though to show I was modest, but this was a lie. I did not want to be modest; it was only what I was told I should feel.

Perhaps the helicopter had made a mistake and was visiting the wrong floor. Perhaps someone on another floor had summoned it. Perhaps there was a service at our building that I had not known about before. But the helicopter merely remained in the air, suspended; it had stopped moving and it was

floating on the other side of the window, beside me.

Yesterday, the supermarket had been low on food. The trucks with supplies had not arrived and some of the shelves were bare. Everyone was throwing the cheaper foods into their carts, particularly the perishables.

"Don't push," said the clerks, speaking with confidence; they were waiting for the trucks to arrive. "There will be more peaches! There will be more carrots, everyone! It's all on its way." There was plenty of canned soup, oddly, but no one was interested in that. Everyone wanted the peaches, the blueberries, the sweet fruits that were edible for a short time. There was no visible emergency, or none that we had been informed of; there was food, they said, coming in from somewhere else, there were trucks rolling down the highway. We had to be patient, the manager said. We just had to trust the trucks were coming. Who did they think we were? Nothing was coming from anywhere. We trusted only our ability to hoard.

I heard a woman, older and sturdy-looking, tossing bell peppers into her cart, chatting with another.

"We're moving to Idaho," she said. Another woman asked why there. "It's the people," she said. "Their friendliness. We went and visited. I felt so comfortable there. The beauty of the mountains. But really, we were there just for a week and I loved the people." She took a deep breath as though en-

visioning a future there. I envied her hope, her love toward those who were really still strangers.

I listened for the sound of sirens, but I heard none. The traffic flowed on the highways, in a sweet and naïve way. People were driving to their work, to appointments, and no one knew the food was about to end. I knew this. Longing hung in the air like wet cotton. I could not identify if it was theirs or mine, but I could feel its presence, pulsing. The scarcity of food in the stores made everyone nervous.

Yesterday, it was my birthday, and I went early to make sure I could get ingredients to make a cake with strawberries in the frosting. The sweetness of birthday cake had clearly been created for a reason. You wanted that taste in your mouth as you looked toward what would come next. I found that cake and then, full of a brassy confidence, I had approached the last box of strawberries in the store. An older man, his hair a translucent white flame, his hands gripping his supermarket cart, had been shuffling toward the box and I swooped in and grabbed it. I wanted the strawberries more. That was what I told myself. First was first. I had stolen a pack of berries from the too slow grasp of an old man. I saw him turn away sadly and tried to feel unaffected by that. I imagined offering him some strawberries, but I was honestly afraid things would get out of hand. I wanted them. There was nothing complicated about this; I just did. My aging year was different from his aging year, not as dire, or perhaps more. Aging was about proof, and I wanted

to prove that I could grab first. Now the box was hidden in the refrigerator behind some less appealing items—a bowl of old spaghetti, some celery sticks. I had grabbed those strawberries, and I made a small cake, and I had savored its sweetness, bite by bite.

I stared at the helicopter. I did not know its intent. Was it there to save or kill me? How sad that these were the only two choices I could imagine. Why couldn't I believe it might just take me on a nice trip? Was that the problem with everything, the inability to figure out intent? The way the frail old man had glanced at the strawberries, the sound of shoes clattering across the produce section as people pushed forward and grabbed items for their carts. I had not thought I would be one of the grabby ones; perhaps I had not been. Perhaps the man had stepped away, interested in other food options, allowing me to lunge. But that was wrong, and I knew it. I knew what I had done.

It was only a matter of time before the army filled the streets. There were a couple of soldiers by the supermarket, for an unspecified reason—they looked like they had recently been brought in. They had thick, beige bulletproof vests and long rifles that they held in their arms. They were young enough to be my sons. I was far away from my own children. We all stood and pretended to ignore each other, but I knew we were aware. Our attempts to ignore one another were pretentious and ridiculous. They stared at nothing, feet planted,

cradling their guns. Their faces were young and dreamy as though inhabited by clouds.

Now I inched forward, sheets clutched to my chest, eyeing the helicopter and whoever was in it. The cats stirred, their mouths opening like tiny caves that led to the center of the world. They began meowing, awake, sensing something.

When would the war start? All I wanted was an answer. Hopefully the person in the helicopter would know, the one operating this thing, the one I could not see. I squinted, but the black dome was impenetrable. The pilot told me nothing. We all agreed on the fact that there would be a war. We all knew it was going to happen; it was just a matter of when.

The helicopter trembled by the window. Was the helicopter, besides the pilot, empty, or was it carrying another person? Or more? And how was I supposed to get into it? It seemed either a mean sort of dare or an acknowledgment of skills I did not have. The pilot had to know that I couldn't step through the glass. The helicopter would have to crash through, the window shattering, glass everywhere, the cats probably freaking out and leaping through the broken window, hurtling shrieking to their deaths. How terrible this would be. I loved the cats and did not want anything bad to happen to them. We gazed at each other and when the smaller one climbed on my chest, our hearts beat against one another, as though having a private conversation. How happy we both were then, at peace. It was the most unifying feeling in the world.

I loved the clichéd aspects of it. I wanted to protect his furry, thrumming self.

Be careful, I wanted to tell the pilot, sternly. We will not tolerate harm. Finally, at this age, I could say this. Perhaps the helicopter would carry us to safety, to land on the top of a cloud, to the mirrored surface of a lake, its ramp unfolding gently into air. A location I did not know. I wanted to believe in the buoyant surface of clouds, in safety. The room suddenly felt claustrophobic and terribly hot; my cheeks were burning. I had to get out.

The helicopter hovered, silent.

The helicopter, its pilot, were not being helpful. No one was telling me how to get to it. Panic flared in my chest. What was the helicopter going to do? There were already dozens dead somewhere in the city, all people who had done nothing wrong; I did not know where they were, but I knew. There would be more, and I wanted to help them, but I did not know how to start. The old man was perhaps wandering by the strawberries and I wanted just then to know his name. Where was he, was he as hungry as I was, and did he feel the same trembling inside? Who else had found the strawberries, and what were people storing in their vegetable bins? What could we offer to anyone else? I wanted to rush again through the produce aisle, I wanted to toss free food into other people's carts, I wanted to imagine myself as that sort of person, and I wanted to taste the strawberries, forever, in my mouth.

The helicopter was turning, the air stirring in great clear sashes around it. Stop, I shouted. Wait.

I wanted to fly it. Which was ridiculous because I had never flown a helicopter in my life. I believed I would be a good pilot. My hope was a great shroud of deceit, but necessary. The pilot could not hear me shouting through the glass window. Perhaps the pilot could see my mouth shouting, but that was easy to ignore. Wait, I shouted again; let me try. I put my hands on the glass. Please. Don't leave yet. Let me try. The helicopter turned on a pale sheave of light, the propeller beating the air, and I imagined myself inside it, gripping the controls of the machine, guiding it with my hands, the helicopter rising and falling as I surveyed the glowing, broken city and wondered, among the wreckage, what it was to be victorious.

Three Poems

bridgette bianca

---

i may not be the sun

maybe i am the moon
and sometimes make the mistake of thinking
i'm the only moon in the universe
just because i see
how the tide moves beneath me

now i'm talking in metaphors
to make myself feel better
as if anything ever moved beneath me
as if anyone ever looked up into my face
and thought of the future

charade

i say
okay
because
stay
sounds
selfish

but
sometimes
stay
sounds like
what do you need
have you eaten
when was the last time
you slept
do you want to talk about
it
(or
us)
or anything
(do you want
me)
do you want me to keep talking
so you don't have to
think
about
it

(or us)
or anything
do you want me to fill the silence
or hold
it
close
(or
you
close)
you know
i don't want
you to
leave
(me)

if i thought
i
was
enough
to keep you here
i would say
(i love you
sometimes
sounds like)
stay

but
sometimes
i love you
sounds like

goodbye

so i say
okay
because
i'm not ready
for the way that sounds

i have to say this now

before i cannot get the lonely unstuck
from the roof of my mouth
before every word tastes like
your name
sour
or a sickly sweet
and sorry as usual

Contributors

Chris Abani is a novelist, poet, essayist, screenwriter, and playwright. The recipient of the PEN USA Freedom to Write Award, a Lannan Literary Fellowship, a California Book Award, and a Guggenheim Fellowship, his fiction includes *GraceLand* (FSG), *The Virgin of Flames* (Penguin), and *The Secret History of Las Vegas* (Penguin). He is a Board of Trustees Professor of English at Northwestern University.

Daniel Alarcón is a novelist and radio producer whose books include *War by Candlelight* (2005), *Lost City Radio* (2007), *At Night We Walk in Circles* (2014), and *The King is Always Above the People* (2017). The executive producer of Radio Ambulante, a Spanish-language narrative journalism podcast, Alarcón is an assistant professor of broadcast journalism at Columbia University. His honors include a Whiting Award in fiction, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a Lannan Literary Fellowship.

Emily Hodgson Anderson is a professor of English at University of Southern California, where she specializes in 18th century British literature and culture. She is the author, most recently, of *Shakespeare and the Legacy of Loss* (University of Michigan Press). Her work has appeared in *The Literary Hub*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and numerous academic journals.

Karen E. Bender is the author of four works of fiction. Her story collection *Refund* (Counterpoint) was a finalist for the National Book Award, and *The New Order* (Counterpoint) was longlisted for the Story Prize. Her novels are *Like Normal People* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) and *A Town of Empty Rooms* (Counterpoint). A new collection of stories and a novel are under construction.

bridgette bianca is a poet and professor from South Central Los Angeles. When she is not sharing her own poetry, she co-curates two literary series, Making Room for Black Women and the Women's Center for Creative Work Reading Series. *be/trouble* (Writ Large Press) is her debut collection of poetry.

Emily Rapp Black is the author most recently of *The Still Point of the Turning World* (Penguin). She is associate professor of creative writing at UC Riverside.

Victoria Chang's poetry books include *OBIT* (Copper Canyon Press), *Barbie Chang* (Copper Canyon Press), *The Boss* (McSweeney's), *Salvinia Molesta* (University of Georgia Press), and *Circle* (Southern Illinois University Press). Her children's books include *Is Mommy?* (Beach lane), illustrated by Marla Frazee, and *Love, Love* (Sterling), a middle grade novel. She serves as program chair of Antioch's low-residency MFA program.

Natashia Deón is the author of the novel *Grace* (Counterpoint), and the founder of Redeemed, a non-profit organization that pairs professional writers and lawyers with people seeking to clear their criminal records. She is a practicing criminal attorney and the creator of two Los Angeles-based reading series: Dirty Laundry Lit and The Table. Her forthcoming novel, *The Perishing* (Counterpoint), is due out in Nov. 2021.

Maria Duarte received her MFA in Creative Writing from the University of California, Riverside – Palm Desert. She has published poems in *Verdad Magazine* and *The Good Grief Journal: A Journey Toward Healing*. She is poetry editor for *Kelp Journal*.

Kimi Eisele makes things with words, images, bodies, light, nature, and you. She is the author of *The Lightest Object in the Universe* (Algonquin Books), a novel about loss and adaptation in a post-apocalyptic America. Her writing has appeared in *Guernica*, *Longreads*, *Literary Hub*, *Orion*, *Terrain.org*, and elsewhere. She holds a master's degree in geography from the University of Arizona where in 1998 she founded you are here: the journal of creative geography.

Anita Felicelli is the author of the short story collection *Love Songs for a Lost Continent* (Stillhouse Press) and the novel *Chimerica* (WTAW Press). Her nonfiction has appeared in the *Los Angeles Review*

of Books, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *The New York Times*' Modern Love column, *Slate*, and *Catapult*. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her family.

Carribean Fragoza was raised in South El Monte, California. She co-edits UC Press's California cultural journal, *Boom California*, and is the founder of South El Monte Arts Posse, an interdisciplinary arts collective. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared numerous publications, including *BOMB*, *Huizache*, and the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. She is the co-editor of *East of East: The Making of Greater El Monte* (Rutgers University Press) and coordinator of the Kingsley and Kate Tufts Poetry Award at Claremont Graduate University. Her debut collection of stories, *Eat the Mouth That Feeds You*, is forthcoming from City Lights Books.

Lisa Glatt is the author of the novels *The Nakeds* (Regan Arts) and *A Girl Becomes a Comma Like That* (Simon & Schuster), the book of short stories *The Apple's Bruise* (Simon & Schuster), and two collections of poetry. She is a professor at California State University, Long Beach.

Pam Houston is the author of the memoir *Deep Creek: Finding Hope In The High Country* (W.W. Norton), which won the 2019 Colorado Book Award, the High Plains Book Award, and the Reading The West Advocacy Award. She is also the au-

thor of *Cowboys Are My Weakness* (W.W. Norton), and five other books of fiction and nonfiction. She lives at 9,000 feet above sea level on a 120-acre homestead near the headwaters of the Rio Grande and teaches at UC Davis and the Institute of American Indian Arts. She is cofounder of the literary nonprofit Writing by Writers. Her new book, *Air Mail: Letters of Politics, Pandemics and Place*, cowritten with activist Amy Irvine is forthcoming from Torrey House Press.

Liska Jacobs is the author of the novels *Catalina* (FSG Originals) and *The Worst Kind of Want* (MCD). Her essays and short fiction have appeared in *The Rumpus*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The Literary Hub*, *The Millions*, and *Minor Literatures*.

Douglas Kearney has published six books, including the award-winning poetry collection *Buck Studies* (Fence Books); libretti, *Someone Took They Tongues* (Subito); and criticism, *Mess and Mess and* (Noemi Press). His newest collection, *Sho* (Wave), is forthcoming next spring. A Whiting Foundation and Foundation for Contemporary Arts Cy Twombly awardee with residencies/fellowships from Cave Canem, The Rauschenberg Foundation, and others, Kearney teaches creative writing at the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities.

Lynn Melnick is the author of three poetry collections, including *Landscape with Sex and Violence* (YesYes Books) and *Refusenik* (forthcoming from

YesYes Books in 2022). *I've Had to Think Up a Way to Survive*, a book about Dolly Parton that is also a bit of a memoir, will also be published in 2022 by the University of Texas Press.

Andrés Neuman is a poet, translator, columnist, and blogger. The son of Argentinian émigré musicians, he went into exile with his family to Granada, Spain. He is the author of novels, short stories, poems, aphorisms, and the travel book *How to Travel Without Seeing* (Restless Books). His many accolades include being selected as one of *Granta*'s Best of Young Spanish-Language Novelists and named to the Bogotá39 list, the Alfaguara Prize, and Spain's National Critics Prize for Traveler of the Century (FSG) and the Community of Literary Magazines and Presses Firecracker Award for *The Things We Don't Do* (Open Letter). His most recent title translated into English is *Fracture* (FSG).

Wendy C. Ortiz is the author of *Excavation* (Future Tense Books), *Hollywood Notebook* (Writ Large Press), and *Bruja* (Civil Coping Mechanisms).

Lilliam Rivera is an award-winning author of children's books, including her latest young adult novel *Never Look Back* (Bloomsbury). Her work has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *Elle*. A Bronx, New York native, she lives in Los Angeles.

Susan Straight is the author, most recently, of the memoir *In the Country of Women* (Catapult), which was released in paperback in August. Her new novel, *Mecca*, is forthcoming in 2021.

Susan Terris is the author of seven books of poetry, seventeen chapbooks, three artist's books, and one play. Her poems have appeared in The Pushcart Prize XXXI and The Best American Poetry 2015. Her newest book is *Dream Fragments*, which won the 2019 Swan Scythe Press Award.

Lynne Thompson is the author of *Beg No Pardon* (Perugia Press), which won the Great Lakes Colleges New Writers Award in 2008. Her other books include *Start With A Small Guitar* (What Books Press) and *Fretwork*, winner of the Marsh Hawk Poetry Prize and published by Marsh Hawk Press.

Andre Tyson was Principal Dancer and Company Teacher with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater from 1985-1994. He is a former Assistant Dean of the Dance School at the California Institute of the Arts.

Vickie Vértiz is a native Angelena and the oldest child of an immigrant Mexican family. Her poetry and essays have appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, KCET Departures, and the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Her book *Palm Frond with Its Throat Cut* (University of

Arizona Press) won the 2018 PEN America Literary Prize in poetry. A VONA, Macondo, and Canto-Mundo Fellow, she teaches at UC Santa Barbara.

Matthew Zapruder is the author most recently of *Father's Day* (Copper Canyon Press), and *Why Poetry* (Ecco). He is editor at large at Wave Books, and teaches in the MFA program in creative writing at Saint Mary's College of California.