
AIR/LIGHT
winter 2021

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CONTENTS

POETRY

MULTIMEDIA

ART

DEPARTMENTS

COLLABORATIONS

DIARY

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

RESPONSES

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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.*

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Ring Out the Old, Ring in the New

David L. Ulin

When we decided to launch this issue of *Air/Light* during the third week of January, we thought carefully about the date. With the 18th as Martin Luther King Day and the 20th as the inauguration, we chose the 19th because it felt liminal in some essential way. I've spent the last four years wishfully invoking King's observation that "the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice," offered in February 1965—just a few weeks before Selma—from the pulpit of Temple Israel of Hollywood. The inauguration, I am hoping, represents a small piece of proof. None of us could have predicted the insurrection or the impeachment; what they mean for the arc of the moral universe remains to be seen. But can I say that I feel hopeful? If these events represent another set of ruptures, they have (or so I choose to imagine) also clarified the stakes.

A similar balance, or tension, sits at the center of art and literature, which are ethical and political pursuits as much as aesthetic ones. I don't mean to suggest that literature is necessarily good for us, at least not like exercise or watching what we eat. The writing that matters most to me has sharper teeth than that. No, like the arc of the moral universe, literature is, or should be, disruptive, a series of challenges rather than a balm. Its purpose is to provoke, to stir us, to frame a set of glimpses—or, more accurately, lenses—through which we may peer beneath the surface of the world. Sometimes what we find is stark and sometimes it is reassuring. Sometimes it is both at once. Sometimes we find empathy in the experiences, or narratives, of others. Sometimes we confront our own hypocrisies.

This is the case even with work that does not define itself as political. "The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics," George Or-

well wrote in 1946, "is itself a political attitude." The sentiment comes from the essay "Why I Write," which also includes one of his best known declarations: "[I]t is also true that one can write nothing readable unless one constantly struggles to efface one's own personality. Good prose is like a windowpane." Like a windowpane, yes, although I dispute the notion that in writing we must efface our personalities. Rather, it is through such a pane, or lens (that word again), that personality is revealed. We write to find out what we're thinking. We write to find out who we are. In a culture saturated with false narratives, this makes every piece of literature—which is by its nature an art of self-interrogation—a political act.

Think of this issue of *Air/Light*, then, as a mirror. Think of it as a signpost of its time. The work here grows out of upheaval and uncertainty: the pandemic, the election and its aftermath. Like all of us, these writers and artists and musicians are trying to figure it out as they go along. That they can only see it in pieces is as it should be; art and literature are about asking questions, after all. If we knew the answers, there would be no need to be creative. We would not have to imagine a different world.

So join us, if you will, on this journey. Join us in navigating this moment through image and sound and word. Everything is only what we make it.

As Tennyson wrote in "Ulysses": "'Tis not too late to seek a newer world."

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

The Dick, Casillas

Dagoberto Gilb

I like to stop and say hi to Ayisha when I check into the gym. She's usually there, though I'm there more. I come six days a week, either 11 or 1:30. I used to get there at 2 but there's a TV sports show I watch that comes on at 2, lasts an hour. If I want to watch that while I'm on a machine, I get another half hour of exercise without noticing it, almost cheating, if you see what I'm saying. Minimum I want is 60 minutes. I don't know how I or anyone used to exercise before they had machines with cable TV. I'm not buying 1000 songs or 100 CDs. I can't take radio stations anymore, and the music there, it's impossible to find any that isn't old and heard and heard and heard. I feel like a perv listening to the new top-40 station at my age. I go ahead and do that on the low alone in my car. In the gym, TV on the machines wins.

Once in a while Ayisha and I chit-chat. About nothing always. Usually I just take a pause in my step and *hey hey, whadaya say?*, tap the Formica, and I pass on by. She and I have disability in common is why the connection, nothing much else, though that's also enough. I'm an old mother, used to it, but she's too young not to be happy all the time. I get more self-conscious when she's at the desk with Casillas. He's a little dick. So many tats all over his arms and legs and back and even up his chest and neck, his skin color is blue. He thinks he's badass. Accomplished somehow, skilled at whatever. I'm not *that* old. Can't happen. I don't for one second think he's someone I can't deal with. I don't like that he takes away from my big brotherly feelings for Ayisha. That's what he does, though.

I can't do free weights now because I could hurt myself or someone else,

so I go to the weight machines. I actually prefer them. They're better than they were back in the day. I have a few I like—quads, calves, abs, deltoids, traps, biceps, triceps, pecs—but I can't always do them all. I'm old. Puts me down for the next day if I'm not careful. I tell people I've decided not to do the next Olympics, so I go easy. I pick two to four. I like to lift. Since I was a baby, that's the one that makes my body feel strong in the *ya no* weakness that comes with the last lift. I set the pin anywhere from 60 lbs. to 90 lbs., depending on whether I want to do more per three sets, my usual, or just burst my buttons doing fewer with more.

There are a lot of older folks here at the gym. Could be because of the time of day. Many older than me by years, even a decade or two. They're all impressive for being here and in their routine. Women and men pretty close to equal numbers. There's this one older guy who, whenever he sees me, stares into my eyes like he knows me, expecting me to…I don't know. Say hi? If he knows me, I'm not sure why he don't say so. It's gotten so that I started thinking I knew him back. That he began to look familiar to me, too. He was, I saw at a distance, on the machine I liked most and went to first. I didn't change my stride—my cane free limp, is better said. It happens, and I'd just move on to another, and I'd get it tomorrow. But as I got closer, that man stopped. He got up before I could pass by and then stared at me like he does, and I think offered a smile, or close, or it was just kindness. Like to a friend. He didn't say anything but I did. I said *hey, real nice, thank you*, while he went off.

Not like he couldn't know me. Lots of older men know older sports. I had my days. I was good. Star linebacker, fullback, and I could even play safety until I either got too big or they got way faster by my senior high school year. I played baseball—third base or outfield, I could hit—and roundball, though much as I liked it, I wasn't tall enough or quick enough—I couldn't be a guard—and too hot-headed. High school champion at Dominguez High, which was always terrible back in those days. We just about lost to any team, even the all-whiteboy ones. Except me. I'd win somehow in every story told. And I was a Mexican, so I made news everywhere. National. I might've been the first Mexican ever. Or it was that I was taking attention away from the Compton stars. I was recruited across the country. Football and baseball. Local LA schools like UCLA and USC (though not enough there), and Stanford and Cal. Arizona, Washington, Nebraska, Notre Dame, Oklahoma. The teams I liked, that had baseball and football. I wasn't the

smartest about colleges. I didn't know anyone who was.

My parents didn't want me to leave town, even our neighborhood, because my dad was having health trouble and couldn't work, and my mom could barely speak English. It was a tough decision. Really hard. I knew nothing but football, baseball, and eating. I loved my mom's pollo en mole. I loved sirloin con una papa. I loved double cheeseburgers. I just took my high school coach's advice, the offer from Oklahoma. My mom, looking up at me because she was such a chaparra, was always about to cry, but my dad had come around. My brother and sister were proud. I'd be back. I'd make money. They thought I'd eventually drive back up in a *porcha*, which is a *Porsche* to non-Mexicans.

Make it quick: It wasn't even playing football, which I had just started doing there. Weeks. I was doing good, which is to say they liked me playing both sides of the team still, and I liked it, and more newspapers were saying that too. National football news. I didn't get a lot of time to read much, but I saw reporters, watching me mostly. I was in the hot gym, on the hot field, sweating, drinking and dousing water, eating a ton of anything that looked like food, and sleeping in what they told me was a dorm room but to me was just a bed. I had barely gone to classes, they were a blur, and I never did buy books. I didn't know what or where but, always hungry, of course I said hell yeah I wanted a giant steak, and the young assistant coach driving turned left in front of a pickup going maybe 50 on a sunny blue Oklahoma street and its front grill came through the door to where I was sitting with no seatbelt on. I didn't die but I was a long time in the first hospital and then came another and then another in a wheelchair and then the wheelchair in no hospital. Like that. Years. It took a while to have no wheelchair. I might not walk too good, but I walk.

*

People pass the reclined bikes and treadmills and ellipticals and step machines always. It's what you see when your eyes aren't on the TV. What I never see is Casillas's eyes on me. They happen to be looking away, seeing something else, someone else, anything else. They're busy, they're doing something, it's nothing personal, he's hurrying even when he's not really hurrying. It just happens that way, you know. Even off the machine when I am walking by, he can't see me while he's looking down, or *gee, what just hap-*

pened over there? as he's getting close or passing me.

That older man seems to be at the gym the same hours I am, and he's at machines a few away and sometimes even right next to me. Casillas sees him all the time.

"Hey, Coach," he'll say. "You doin' good?"

I never really hear what the old guy says.

"You're lookin' good," Casillas says. "Good to see ya."

I just think Casillas is a dick. I don't see how anyone can blame me for this opinion. I don't know why he sucks up to this older man, but there's a reason and it's not a good one. He should at least call him "sir."

I'm not sure exactly what caused whatever it is about Casillas and me. It don't make a lot of sense to me. There's not a lot of us at this gym, and it'd seem like we'd have a connection in that way. Not that it's an expensive gym, exclusive. Not like Austin is racist or segregated, although it does seem to be a very Anglo town. I live here with my sister and her generous husband Mike Loya—in a remodeled garage, like a one-bedroom apartment, near the river. He's a captain on the fire department and he's Mexican—from El Paso—and so are their kids, even though I wouldn't say any of them think about it a lot, or that their neighborhood is or ever was Mexican like where we grew up in LA or where Mike grew up in El Paso. That's kind of good, right? In fact here in Austin, they like things Mexican. Besides cops and firemen—wait, at least one Mexican woman there too, I met her—they like blankets and dinnerware and the food and the decor, and going to Mexico on trips and even Spanish as a language. The gym just isn't very much Mexican, and it seems like me and Casillas and every once in a while an older lady on her cell while she's on the bike—no talking on the phone in the gym is the rule—gossiping with a sister in Monterrey. Equally irritating if she were chattering in English.

My best guess is that it began at the desk. I was talking to Ayisha and we got to laughing. It couldn't have been about a lot. I've strained to remember that whole time because it's all I could come up with and, really, it couldn't have been much. I'm old and she's not. I was talking to her because of her trouble, not to make any. Nothing else in my head, and it wouldn't have occurred to me that anything could bounce back. But I do remember that Casillas was on the other side of the desk too. At the laser reader, checking people in, ahead of where I was talking to Ayisha. And though I wasn't paying much attention then, my memory recorded more.

He was frowning, pissed off. At the time I thought it had nothing to do with anybody but himself. We all can get like that. He'd said he needed her to be doing this, what he was doing, not him. She and I hadn't been talking that long I don't think, but it was long enough for a problem. I mean, we did start laughing like we were outside on a nice weekend day. She was at work. I wasn't. Nothing but time and it was like we weren't talking about what happened to our bodies. We were talking about our lives. She jerked herself out of a relaxed mode when he said what he did. He scowled going away when she took his stool. She blipped me in. I just figured it was about being at work and went on through.

It was after that came his attitude. Seemed to grow by the day. That badass man strut got wider. Like those tats were muscles. That others weren't him. That I was almost nothing, and that don't work with me. I know I'm not what I was, what I could've been. I know most don't know that. A few do. They can still see it in a broken me. People who remember, remember me. Ones who know sports and sports stories. Who aren't dumb culos like Casillas who don't know shit. Who thinks the world is *only* what he thinks and knows about. That he's some kind of mero chingón at a gym where he's a personal trainer to a few or whatever? Who sees me and goes, there's some old crippled nothing. But I can still take this punk how I am right now.

I did weight machines and I'm on a reclined bike, the TV on. I'll go to my 60 mins and maybe I'll do more if I'm not sick of sitting here, peddling. I don't know why I like all this still so much, but I do. I've loved gyms since I was young and they were always good to me. The old man who knows me, who I think I maybe know back, is a few bikes over. People are coming and going in front of us and one is Ayisha. I don't see her in this area much. She has trouble walking the way she wants, and she's showing it today. She smiles at me as she comes and I say *hey there, young woman!* and I am smiling big, happy for both of us. She stops by me. It is for me some and I pretend it's only that, but I know it's not. She's hurting, a bad body day. She needs to walk more maybe, or maybe just not any today. Some days aren't as good as others.

I offer her my seat. I say it's the comfortable one, making a face to say it's not at all. She laughs. She asks me what I'm watching. I'm about to play with that subject when suddenly Casillas is on the other side of my bike.

"They're waiting on you," he tells her. "You forgot?"

"She'll just be a minute or two more, man," I say. "You need to give her a

little more room." I'm not saying so, but mostly I'm talking about the joints in her hips that I know bothered her.

"You don't need to worry about that," he said to me. He didn't actually say that to me because the words weren't to my face, with his eyes.

"I think you shouldn't talk to me that way," I said.

Ayisha mumbled or so it seemed. I wasn't hearing her well. I was getting off my reclining bike.

"It's all right, Coach," Casillas said to the old man near me. "Please don't worry yourself."

I stood near him. He acted like he wasn't worried. Seemed like I was a foot taller, at least 50 pounds bulkier.

"Is something bothering you that we should deal with here?" I asked.

"Coach," he said, waving his hand no, looking at him because the old guy was coming over to us, not looking at me.

"Did you hear what I just said?" I said.

I might have stepped closer. Because then Casillas shoved me away. I'm not sure why I didn't expect that, why it caught me so off guard. And I do have my own wobbly leg issues. I am not the most stable two-legged gym rat. I stumbled. I'm not sure what it was exactly, but I think my foot caught the bike's foot and I went backwards. I went down hard because of the foot tangle. On the ground I knew I couldn't pop back up if I tried, I could tell. Always hard for this body to get off the ground even when it isn't hurt. My head hit another machine and there was a cut on the side of my forehead. My back didn't like what it hit, how.

People were around and worried about the cut on my head. I wouldn't say anything about my twisted foot. I couldn't get up easy because of it. It was all still there, not broken in my opinion, but it was going to hurt.

Seemed like I was stuck on the ground.

"Do you need help?" the old man asked me. He was the first there, squatting down to me. "Can you stand?"

"Should we call an ambulance?" someone asked. "What do you think, Coach?"

"I can't believe that happened," I tell the old guy. "I completely lost my stupid balance and then I lost it all." I wanted him and everyone listening to understand.

"You need help?" he asks again.

"My pride," I tell him privately. He did look awfully familiar.

"You gotta let that go so you can see what's really hurting," he says.

I laugh. "That sounds like some advice I should take."

*

I was out for a few weeks. I wore the boot with the velcro straps to the gym that first day back to make sure I didn't reinjure that ankle. I felt happy going back. I always felt like the gym made me feel better about everything. It was my one sure thing. I'd say that's how it was for that old guy. I decided I wanted to meet him. Introduce myself and thank him for that day they took me to the hospital. He had my back.

Ayisha wasn't at the desk. I was hoping she'd be happy to see me. Casillas wasn't there either. Maybe he'd be unhappy to see me, maybe he'd want to smile. I had to force myself to not think about him. I walked straight to the bikes because I wanted to move my legs. I was even slower walking with the boot.

The lady next to me said hi and asked if the foot was all that still remained. She was here then, she told me. I recognized her, but it was the first time we'd talked.

"As dangerous as ever," I said.

"It looked worse," she told me.

"Stupid fall," I said.

"The coach told me about you," she said.

"About me?"

"From football," she said.

"I don't know him," I admitted, "but I want to now. He's a football coach here in Austin?"

She laughed. "You don't know Coach Royal?"

"No, ma'am."

"I assumed you'd played for him…The Longhorns' football stadium is named after him, for goodness sake. You don't know Texas's greatest coach?"

"I've only lived in Austin a little over a year," I said.

She didn't even hear me say that. "You don't know the news, either, do you?"

I didn't have to say no.

"He passed."

"Just since…I haven't been here?"

She nodded pedaling, and I pedaled too.

"That's sad," I told her. "I'm very sorry."

She nodded. "He had a good life. We all loved him."

I asked my cuñado about him, I asked my sister. They laughed at me. Of course they didn't know him personally, but even they knew who he was by the stadium name and the news and Texas football everything all the time. We'd even been to two games together there. That is, I myself had been to Darrell K Royal stadium both those two times.

I couldn't get it off my mind that I missed the chance to talk to him. That I didn't know who he was, but he knew who I was, back when, that maybe he even wanted to know me the way I was now. It dizzied me. Seemed worse than dumb.

Back at the gym, I learned from Ayisha that Casillas had been let go because of the incident. She could barely speak to me without tears. She liked him, of course meaning more than that. I'd missed that, too. So if I saw her behind the desk, I only waved when I blipped in—she didn't work that spot ever now. I was back in my routine, a little slower at the beginning until my foot seemed all good again. The weight machines first, a couple to a few, then aerobics, an hour, while I watched a sports talk show. Somewhere between 11 and 1:30. It wasn't very much. I knew it. It didn't matter. That was what I had left, what I wanted again.

I love the gym. It's where I go. It was me before my football and baseball life. When I was stronger, bigger. Like I'm not now. The world really is more than dicks like Casillas. Who, like me, will miss too much that is right next to him. Some love the outdoors. I love to hear the loud silence of the gym. The plates of weight machines smacking down, the groans from pushing hard, whirs of ellipticals, bikes, fans. Once I was going to be a star, or even was a star, and now I'm here alone, working out with what I still got, and nobody knows me, or sees me, and that's right where I began, and, like now, it was good then.

RESPONSES

A Visit from My Mother

Lydia Kiesling

My kids' preschool in Oregon reopened on July 1 and closed again on August 31. It was impossible for them to make the finances work with the smaller number of kids, the teachers felt unsupported and afraid, and many had their own school-age children who would start remote learning in September. When I picked up my girls the day the school announced the new closure, the director and I both choked up at the gate.

A silver lining was that now my mom could come to visit. She lives by herself and the pandemic has made her lonely. She was desperate to see her grandkids, and the end of school would allow for a two-week quarantine after my girls left the company of other children.

My mom lives in California, and in the weeks before she came, the state was burning. It was among the worst fire seasons in memory, or at least since last year, which was also the worst in memory, as every year seems now to be. It gets hot where she lives, and there had been consistent 110-plus degree weather combined with choking air and friends preparing to evacuate. Everyone was miserable.

She arrived in Oregon two days after windstorms here that were apparently also among the worst in memory and contributed to epic conflagrations that suddenly roared up across the state with dizzying speed.

Because we live at a slight remove from the fires, it felt uncanny, the simultaneous speed and subtlety with which this disaster imposed itself. On Tuesday, we didn't go out because it was gusty and unpleasant, with branch-

es strewn over the roads, even though the sun was shining. It wasn't a conscious decision to stay home so much as a suggestion wordlessly offered by the outdoors and easily accepted by us. By Thursday, when my mother arrived, the sky was the color of an old bruise and smelled like a campfire when we stepped outside. By the time the smoke was really upon us, apocalypse had come to nearby communities; the ash that dusted our porch and car was composed of livelihoods and lives, trees and homes and pets and cars. We noticed that we had been inside for several days already; it didn't take long before we felt that we had always been inside, and that we always would be.

Thus my mother, who had been sitting alone in her house for a very long time to escape the heat, the smoke, and the virus, was now immured with us.

My mother is extremely tidy, and I tried to clean the house thoroughly before she came. But the ability to clean requires good mental health and the prolonged absence of other people from the house, and as I wiped ineffectually at baseboards that hadn't truly been seen to since … May?, I began to resent her arrival. She was going to notice the baseboards, as I had noticed the baseboards, but unlike me, she had not come to live in a queasy resigned accord with them. My housekeeping strategy is to let the perfect be the enemy of the good to the extent that the good is slain and buried in a potter's field while the perfect has a pre-existing commitment at someone else's house. (Possibly my mother's.)

We both stewed for the entire week of her visit. She was worried about me, and I was worried about her, and we showed this through needling one another, falling into an exhausting and ancient groove. There is a way of being worried about that makes you feel like a frog pinned on a table, and I spent the week silently accusing her of thought crimes.

Like many people desperate to escape the bad air in Oregon, I was encouraged by an Instagram meme to simmer herbs on the stove against the poison smoke. For a few days, this essence filled our house in a way I found pleasant but which I soon learned from the local newspaper was actually insalubrious.

I got the sense that this was something my mother already knew. "It certainly makes things very humid," she had pointed out primly when I first set the pot to boil. But the humidity made the baseboards easy to clean, and so I stormed around the house with towel in hand, swiping at grime. My

mother was despairing about the air. My husband showed her the spread of the smoke on a map. "We would have to drive six hours to get out of it," he pointed out.

Every afternoon at 4:30, my mother made a martini. I started having one too, and it was the highlight of the day.

What were the children doing during this time? They were eerily calm. The older one was relatively peaceful as she did her thirty minutes of kindergarten. The younger one watched the iPad in the bed. We made Slime and played with it. They played Magna-Tiles. We did a puzzle. My husband and I remarked that they must have gotten so used to things not being fun after six months of pandemic that staying inside with burning eyes while being told the air outside was poison was nothing new.

But that erases my mom's contributions. The shame I felt about my baseboards had briefly disappeared when my kids first saw their grandmother and threw their arms around her legs, the happiest I'd seen them in weeks—or when they went and got into her bed in the middle of the night instead of mine.

On the day before she left, the seventh day of her visit, I finally drove us to the coast, where the air was allegedly in the "moderate" category. We went to the beach that you will recognize from *The Goonies*. I hadn't packed anything like bathing suits or towels, because I had no expectation that it would be nice. I had our masks and our hand sanitizer and the water bottles. The day was gray and misty, the sun trying to poke through, and the girls shed their clothes as they ran toward the water.

I am terrified of the waves of the Pacific Ocean, which snatch children and adults every year, so I yelled at them not to go in deeper than their ankles. My mother radiated anxiety to an extent that irritated me. When she turned and left the beach, I ran to ask what she was doing.

"I'm going to the car to wait," she told me. "I'm scared. You've got to get them away from those waves."

I yelled, furious at her for being so anxious, and later I yelled at the kids, overwhelmed by my own intrusive thoughts. Nearby, a seabird ate the guts out of another seabird, and everyone else who had come to the beach to breathe stopped to take a picture. The girls were so happy, despite the frazzled women upon whom they relied. We saw a seal swimming in the ocean, and they wrote a message in the sand.

I thought I was eager for my mother to leave, but the next day, when she

did, I wept on her shoulder. Early the following morning, my younger daughter left the crook of my arm, where she spends, roughly, the hours of two to seven a.m., and ran toward the room where my mother stays.

"Where are you going?" I called.

"I'm going to see Grandma," she called back, even though she had seen my mother depart the day before.

"She's not here," I said, and she slunk back to our bed and got under the covers in her footie pajamas. Later, my mom sent an email that was so long I skimmed it nervously, but the takeaway was that she was proud of my husband and me for doing a good job under the difficult circumstances. I cried.

The next week, the skies cleared but both kids fell apart. Now there are more fires. A friend's house in California burned down, destroying everything she owned. Tonight, the smoke from that fire is overhead in Portland, and the sky is orange again. I lost it on the fractious children during our video chat with my mom and told her we had to go before she had gotten to talk with them.

"Call me sometime," I heard her say as I touched the red button to end the call.

I don't know when I'll see my mom again. I know that we were lucky, and a bit foolhardy, to have seen one another at all. I yearn to see her in some alternate realm when it's the right time, when it's safe and the baseboards are clean and the skies are clear and we are both happy. But that's not where we are.

The other morning, as I was muttering about picking up magnets from the floor, my younger one said, with the uncanny understanding of very small children, "Your voice sounds just like Grandma."

It's not the togetherness I want, but I suppose it's better than nothing.

Reach: A Correspondence

Jonathan Leal and Michiko Theurer

Dear Friend,

I had the pleasure of meeting Michi back in late 2017, at a late-night music department get-together, while we were both grad students at Stanford. Like others who've had the privilege of speaking with her, I was blown away by her intellectual energy, by the range of her creative interests and capacities as a visual artist, violinist, writer, and scholar. In the few years we overlapped in Palo Alto, I was lucky to riff with her on topics we still care deeply about—musical and kinesthetic imaginations, composition across media, aesthetic crunchiness, queer women of color feminism, decolonial theory-praxis, community building. Many of those conversations were made possible by a critical-creative Tiny Studio Salon series that Michi organized and ran out of her apartment for those few years, which she did on top of her

Dear Friend,

I met Jonathan a few years ago and developed the sort of full-throttle creative and scholarly crush that in high school and undergraduate years would have entirely prevented me from talking to him. At the time, he was working intensively on his dissertation, while also shaping and tending what could easily have counted for a second dissertation, his transmedia collaboration *Futuro Conjunto* with producer Charlie Vela and a network of amazing Rio Grande Valley artists. My first taste of this project came in one of my Tiny Studio Salons, when Jonathan, seated on the floor of my studio apartment, gathered all twenty or so of us who were participating into the warm, page-long world of a fictive concert set in the year 2120. Just over a year after that Tiny Studio gathering, in the early days of the COVID lock-

coursework and performance responsibilities. Totally inspiring.

Last July, amidst the convergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the global protests for Black life (what Stuart Hall would have called the present "conjuncture"), after having just moved to a new place in Los Angeles, and Michi to her childhood home in North Carolina, I could think of no better way to stay connected than through making music somehow. I sent Michi a quick text. Thankfully(!), she was game to collaborate.

In the three months that followed, what came of that collaboration was essentially an epistolary musicking—a vibrational correspondence both asynchronous (in our inventing and sounding separately, then sharing over the Internet) and synchronous (in the shared, fictive, musical time of our experiments). We exchanged a wide range of audio files—serene, crackly piano loops; crunchy violin textures; experimental pop stems; local, outdoor sound recordings; anything that moved us. We honestly didn't know at first what form we wanted our work to take; we just wanted to create something together. This still strikes me as an honest way of doing closeness, of practicing friendship. Our closeness, a sonic proximity, pursued during an apocalypse in which physical distance

down, he shared a musical track with a group of people gathered via Zoom: "HEATDEATH," by the in-universe band Simonada. The track still puts a lump in my throat as I listen today—the gorgeous bend of those trumpets, the urgent stagger of the beat.

So obviously, when Jonathan asked if I wanted to make music together, I immediately said yes.

We had both just moved away from campus, Jonathan to Los Angeles for an academic position, and me to my childhood home in North Carolina, so our collaboration took the form of a web of exploratory video calls, Google Jamboard sketches, texts, emails, and layers of audio recordings and Logic projects. The track we're sharing here is less the tip of an iceberg than a single snapshot of a multi-part trip, the highlights of which for me include jamming to groovy bass lines sent by Jonathan and inventing textural corners of an imaginary shared space.

There were a couple of moments when I got stuck. Early on, Jonathan sent a serene piano-based response to a reaching gesture, a tonal nugget I'd embedded in a flurry of crunchy textural layers. I didn't feel like I was in the same space at the time (serenity scared me a bit), and so Jonathan generously suggested that we take that as a cue to explore some oth-

meant biological safety; our epistolary musicking: a sharing of sound letters that, as anthropologist David Scott notes of written ones, can in the best cases "disclose" and "enact" "relational sentiments and virtues we commonly think of as internal to friendship": "affection, loyalty, indulgence, sympathy, complementarity, tolerance, equality, stability, candor, respect, truthfulness, liberality, trustworthiness."

"More than any other . . . form," Scott continues, "the letter has the capacity to honor friendship—to give friendship its measure and its due."

Eventually, after some laggy live jamming via Zoom, some tipsy syncopated improvisations, and some refreshingly "out" explorations of timbre, Michi and I began circling back to where we'd started—toward a wistful, even pastoral musical universe filled with subtle, unnamed dissonances. There was a familiarity to this aural space that spoke to and shook both of us in ways that marked our differences and distances, our traumas and musical experiences. As artists conscious of our social positionalities—as a white-presenting Japanese American woman from North Carolina, on the one hand, and a light-skinned Chicanx man from South Texas, on the other—we began to acknowledge these difficulties, interrogating our difficult er areas. When I got obsessed with and then stuck in our new corners of rhythmic groove, he suggested that we could revisit the earlier space (serenity, reach). I listened back and thought, yes! Now I can hear space for some friction. I imagined a single violin line that pushed gently but firmly against the serenity of what Jonathan had outlined. I recorded a bunch of takes and sent over a Logic file with all of them muted except the last one, in which I had decided (within the deeply ingrained language of Western harmonic conventions) to flat-out contradict what Jonathan had created.

In response, Jonathan told me he had tried unmuting all the takes I'd recorded and playing them back at once, and he kind of loved it. He sent a new version, in which he had removed his serene piano layer like no-longer-needed scaffolding. He had unmuted and then painstakingly interwoven the heap of files I'd recorded and dismissed. This was exactly the sort of drastic reorienting I love, and I was delighted and honored by what he'd heard. But under the influence of late-night doubt and an episode of Unorthodox in which I heard resonances between orthodox Judaism and Western conservatory culture, I started to worry that we'd landed in a sound-world that was uncomfortably centered in the world

relationships to Western art music while composing a piece in its cosmos.

In conversations and letters, Michi generously shared stories of her upbringing in the very house to which she'd returned in Greenville, and of her early years studying violin with her mother. Michi's mom taught her the Suzuki method—a form of music instruction developed by Shinichi Suzuki in part "to create channels for peace in the wake of Hiroshima," and also deeply entangled "with oppressive and exclusive power structures." I shared stories of my mother as well as my maternal grandfather—about their lives and musicalities shaped by the U.S.–Mexico borderlands, their shared solaces in Romantic sounds, and their presence in my musical intuitions.

As Michi and I continued working on our piece—the form of which had emerged from unmuting, rearranging, and processing over fifty separate violin recordings, which, as Michi put it, felt incredibly "on-the-nose" metaphorically(!)—we reflected on some of the ways we and our families have suffered classical music's colonizing infrastructures: the entanglements of sound and timbre with gender, ability, race, class, empire; the insistent whiteness of many music conservatory spaces; the tacit associations of personal worth and of Western art music, a space whose complex histories and ongoing oppressions I was trying to disentangle myself from.

Over the past three years at Stanford, I had gone from feeling at the cusp of a creative synthesis involving my love for violin performance, cross-categorical conversation, and wild visual metaphor, to feeling a deep disillusionment with the engrained colonial toxicities of my hybrid conservatory and liberal arts educations, reflected back to me in the dispassionate lens of a musicology Ph.D. My hope came from collaborative explorations of intermedial spaces, inspired by the genre-bending and community-minded work of Matana Roberts, Claire Chase, and Mazz Swift, and more immediately by Jonathan's own work at the intersections of fiction and inventive popular music genres. Listening to the rich tapestry that Jonathan had woven from my muted takes, I felt fear: Had I dragged him away from his place of growth and fullness, into a space that felt thick with the weight of my own attachment to nineteenth-century European tonal harmony and lush, socially insulated lyricism?

In a careful and generous letter, Jonathan unfolded some of his difficult past as a student of Western art music in the Rio Grande Valley

musical performance. As La Maestra Cherríe Moraga instructs: we "dug up the dirt."

As we opened up to one another across our many distances, geographically removed from many people we love, something wonderful and unexpected happened: through our doing of friendship, our epistolary musicking, we started to hear ourselves, each other, and our families' musical histories with a new compassion—a compassion arrived at, surprisingly, by way of a familiar and estranging musical language, a shared "mother tongue" that both is and is not our own. This felt, still feels, like what it might mean for the two of us to "honor friendship," to give it "its measure and its due."

When we finally finished this piece, and we'd sent it to dear friend and producer-historian Charlie Vela in the Rio Grande Valley, who generously mastered the track to bring forward the rich, bassy depths of our explorations, Michi and I started reflecting on what this had meant to us—how difficult and rewarding our shared excavations had been. As I listen to our track now, gazing out my darkened window at the western edge of a breathless country, I can't help but feel closer to home, to family, to Michi—to the hope inherent in reaching for someone, somewhere. and then at the University of North Texas, where his grandfather had had similarly trying experiences as a music major fifty years before. He ended with a gesture of compassion: "When I hear your violin, the re-arrangement of all those muted tracks into a steady rise and fall, I hear something my mother would find comforting." Listening to Jonathan listening to our sounds through the ears of his mother, I found myself comforted too, and wrote: "In your sharing I realize that here's yet another place where I'd been imagining a linear track that is in fact a richly inhabited and complex space."

I'm reading *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, by adrienne maree brown, and I want to quote the entire book here, but I'll settle for a section in which she describes "Visionary Fiction" (a term from Walidah Imarisha, co-editor of *Octavia's Brood*). "Art is not neutral," brown writes. "It either upholds or disrupts the status quo, advancing or regressing justice. . . . visionary fiction is a way to practice the future in our minds, alone and together." And: "One of the outcomes of the 'Engage Community of Practice' year of building relationships? and sharing of ourselves, was an idea articulated toward the end by participant Gibrán Rivera: coevolution through friendship. Meaning: we evolve in relation-

Yours,
Jonathan

ships of mutual transformation."

The emergent music that Jonathan affirmed in hearing and sculpting what I'd dismissed, and in being present as we each articulated our frictions and reachings, gave me a way to understand that what is gentle and loving can also disrupt. (Or: what is disruptive can also be gentle and loving.) The track we made and the spaces with which we connected in the process disrupted my stuckness, made space for complexity. Like *Futuro Conjunto*, a visionary fiction, but formed in the (small, personal, deep) space of our friendship. I want to share that.

Yours,
Michi

FICTION

Teaching My Mother How to Drive

K-Ming Chang

When my mother turned sixty-five, she asked me to teach her to drive. She called me from Montebello and I heard a man beside her, the most recent of her husbands, the one my oldest sister nicknamed Pawnshop because that was what he owned. My oldest sister nicknamed all the husbands after what they owned: Dimsum Restaurant, Dog, Dog, Snake, 1994 Subaru. When I first heard the name of the pawnshop, I realized I'd gone there years earlier with my mother's jade donut necklace, which he turned away because it was fake. *This is just glass*, he said, holding it up for the light to swell, showing me the arteries of green dye. Bad glass, he'd clarified, though I didn't know how glass could be good or bad, just broken or not.

I was the only one in my family who could drive, the only one who steered to another city and stayed. My sisters had husbands to ferry them, and my mother took the bus to the restaurant. She told me once, before I left, that a fortune teller in Yilan told her never to drive a car, because in her past life she'd run someone over, and the victim's ghost would avenge themselves by hipping her vehicle off a cliff. *There were so many cliffs in Yilan*, she said, *every road led to a coast. So I didn't ever drive*. Years later, my oldest sister said this was a lie, that my mother was lazy: she lacks ambition, my oldest sister told me, but I disagreed. I'd once seen my mother chase her second husband down the street, whipping him with a bouquet of scallions, all because he refused to water the tinfoil tray where she wanted to grow sweet-peas.

All the men, I said to my sister. The men she collected over the years, shining their teeth on her jeans before gluing them back again, wiping their asses and chins, stitching shut the crotches of their pants, clipping their toenails, tweezing out their fishbones. They always left her or died, and the garage was where she kept shrines to each of them, card tables full of shoelace sculptures and beer cans and model airplanes for the one who had been a retired pilot. *Every loss is labor*, I told my sister.

When I asked my mother why she wanted to drive now, she told me that she'd never seen the sea here. *We live so close to the coast*, she said, *and I've never gone to see it*. I asked why she didn't ask her husband to take her, and she explained that he'd been shot in the hip by a mugger years ago and, since then, couldn't sit for more than an hour before the bone re-fractured. *Okay*, I said, *but even if I teach you, there's a test you have to take for a real license*. My mother said she didn't need to take any test, she just needed to hold onto her hands. And because I had no other excuses, I drove three hours until I reached her, and all along the highway were those pumpjacks I remembered, like the beaks of one-legged birds pecking into the earth, ladling up oil, and I remembered the only time my mother took me somewhere alone.

We went to the La Brea Tar Pits on a voucher she'd cut from the Chinese newspaper, and we walked together through an exhibit with statues of animals draped in tar, their metallic faces mouthing my name. In one corner there was a film projected onto the wall. It showed CGI animals writhing and knotting, choking on veils of tar. There was a saber-toothed tiger that tried to wrestle its cub from the pits and got caramelized instead. There was a bronzed sign that said most of the saber tooth tigers' skeletons showed broken spines, most likely a result of wrestling with the tar in attempts to escape. It gave me nightmares for weeks, and my mother laughed at me, saying that it was all just a movie, that those animals would be long dead anyway, and there was no way to save what was stupid enough to follow its young. But I kept crying, imagining my mother fossilized in tar, her spine severed, her jaw clasped to my neck, and finally she had to tell me that it was all fiction: the tar pits weren't real. They were swamps of black sesame paste, and the animals were acting out a script that said swallow. I didn't believe her, and years later I still hesitate before stepping onto a hot street, afraid I'll sink, that my mother will have to wade in after me and die trying to tug me out with her teeth.

I was the third daughter, the one she birthed in the bathroom and rinsed in the sink, snipping away the mucus around my mouth so I could breathe, the daughter who left her the quickest, who didn't marry or love men, who used to pluck her white hairs for pennies that were never paid. I wondered who plucked out her white hairs now, if her husband did it, if his hands assigned her hair a price, if my mother pawned the silver in her strands. I wondered if she dyed it now, if she did it in the sink where she once washed me—and confessed later, when I was older and stole her wedding earrings and wedged out the crystals with my pinky nail—that she thought about tucking my body under the sheet of sink water and leaving me there to dissolve.

When I arrived at the house in Montebello, my mother was standing by the curb beside the loquat tree she'd grown from a bucket. The fruits battered each other like bells. Her husband was sitting cross-legged on a sheet of newspaper in the garage of shrines. *Meditating*, my mother said. She told me he'd been watching videos of men who could levitate by cultivating their qi. As she got into my passenger seat, I asked if she thought it was possible. *Not for men*, she said, laughing. *Only women are capable of levitating*, she went on: *only women were capable of straying into the sky, loving their families only from above*.

Really, I said, adjusting my rearview mirror. I didn't know what to explain to her first, how to describe the gearshifts, how to translate the word reverse. Yes, my mother told me, clicking her seatbelt. *I've levitated before. It only lasted a second. It was when your oldest sister was born. When I was giving birth to her, I felt my spine detach from my body. I looked down and realized I was floating. Your sister clunked out of me like an anchor and dragged me back down. If it wasn't for the umbilical cord, I would have floated away. I would have seen you from the sky*. If that were true, I told my mother, she wouldn't have seen me at all, because I wouldn't have been born.

Laughing, my mother turned toward me and said I was always logical, the only one in the family who could speak a straight line. But she didn't talk after that, and I told her to look at my hands on the steering wheel, to memorize the way they were placed. My mother nodded, but I could see that she wasn't looking at me, that she was stargazing at the constellations of birdshit on my windshield. *Let me clean it for you*, my mother said, but I told her to pay attention. We're learning to drive right now, I said. We're

learning the different gears. My mother got out of the car, standing in front of it, leaning in to claw at the stains with her fingernails, the birdshit flaking into snow.

Stop, I said, *you'll never go anywhere if you don't stay still for a second*. My mother laughed, her head tilted back, and I saw that the roots of her hair were black. Maybe I don't want to go anywhere, she said to me, though I reminded her about the sea. My mother shook her head and said the sea was the same anywhere, it was just water like everything else, and if she wanted to see something liquid, she could just take a piss. *Fine*, I told her, *then I'll drive you somewhere*. I didn't want her to uncloud my windshield. I didn't want to see her so clearly, standing on the street in front of me, her dyed-black hair having forgotten my hands.

I drove us past the big-beaked pumpjacks, remembering when I was six and asked her if they were crows, forced to peck at the earth forever with their feet webbed in tar. *No*, she'd said then, *not everything flies*. When I stopped, we were at the tar pit museum, and the parking lot was marshed with asphalt, the surface flexing like a belly. The back wheels of my car kneeled into the blacktop, submerged in froth. My mother watched me in the rearview mirror, then got out of the car and walked to my door. *Come out and hold my hand*, she said, so I took it. I followed. She walked ahead of me, turning the asphalt solid where she stepped. Her hands tethered mine, leading me out of the pit I'd driven us into, and I wondered if all these years this was what I feared: not tar but touch, not sinking but floating away.

POETRY

January Garden

Dana Levin

Woke up with: *the minute I let "I love you" touch me, trees*
sprouted from my hair—

Woke up with: *Zeus fatigue—* (what ails the nation)

Woke up with: *the soul a balm, a lozenge, yet another*
pill-shaped thing—

Woke up and recalled nothing— took a walk in winter air—

in the January garden. No one
on benches—

And then remembered—with a bolt—how I'd been
titling a poem in my sleep:

A Little Less, Day After Day, Bomb After Bomb

And just as I remembered, I passed a young woman
at a picnic table, writing in a journal—

And she held—so help me!—a pen shaped
like a bone—

And then I heard the poem:

Each of us, by nature, a killer—

Each of us, by nature,
picking something to practice

mercy on—

FICTION

Dear Cher

Kathleen Gibbons

1

When our father left us, my mother said it was written in the stars. This was the summer of 1976. I was twelve; my brother Doobie, five. We lived in the Sunset Royale Estates, north of Los Angeles, next to the Blazin' Glazin' Car Wash. In the evenings, we put the television on the back patio with an extension cord, sat under the aluminum roof, and waited for a breeze to slide down from Mulholland.

2

My mother and I watched *The Sonny & Cher Show*, all the summer reruns. We adored everything about Cher: the Bob Mackie dresses and her long black hair, the glimmering sequins and thick boa feathers. We felt her voice vibrate through the TV speakers: rich and deep, dark and dreamy. One night a week, she dazzled us with her dancing and made us laugh. It was easy to love her.

3

The morning our father left, Doobie and I were walking to 7-11 for cherry Slurpees. He pulled alongside us in the Skylark, the car shaking as it idled. He leaned out the window. He said, I'll be back. The Skylark thundered down the street, a shroud of blue smoke billowing behind it. That afternoon Doobie sat on the front porch until dinner time. Waiting.

4

Dear Cher,

My mother and I never miss your show. My father can't stand it, but that doesn't matter anymore. My mother said she knew all along he'd leave. Said he was broken when she found him. Said he was cracked, right down the middle.

Your fan,

Amber

5

Doobie said maybe our father was lost, like Gingerbread, our cat. You're too young to understand, I said.

6

For a while, my mother acted like nothing was wrong. She let me help her clean houses for extra pocket money. We ate Fruit Loops for dinner. She splurged on Milk Duds at the movies. Starting over, she said.

Johnny who? she said on the phone to Aunt Ruth.

At Sears, we shopped for new curtains, what the saleslady called "window treatments." My mother paused over each one, admiring the pattern, feeling the fabric between her fingertips.

What do you think? New window treatments or new chemo treatments? It was the first time she'd mentioned chemo. I didn't understand what it meant but I knew it had nothing to do with curtains. I studied her face, unsure what to say. Music piped in from the ceiling speakers.

Maybe the saleslady can help, I said.

7

Doobie asked my mother why she didn't report our father missing to the police. I'd report him if he wanted to be found, she said.

8

On my mother's birthday, I bought her cassette tapes with my pocket money. *Gypsies, Tramps, and Thieves*. *Half-Breed*. For weeks Doobie and I lay in bed at night, listening to her sing along. She knew all the words and harmonized with Cher, the slow, drawn-out ballads lulling us to sleep. When "The Way Of Love" came on, my mother grew quiet and let Cher sing to her:

When you meet a boy
That you like a lot
And you fall in love
But he loves you not
If a flame should start
As you hold him near
Better keep your heart
Out of danger, dear

9

Maybe my mother was wrong. Maybe my father wanted to be found. Maybe he just misplaced himself.

10

One night Cher said, The trouble with some women is they get all excited about nothing—then marry him. My mother tilted her head back, exhaled from her cigarette, and watched the smoke touch the ceiling. Got that right, she said.

11

My father named Doobie after the Doobie Brothers, a band that was originally called Pud until they changed it for obvious reasons. He had no idea what a name like Doobie would do to a kid like Doobie. At least he had the sense not to name him Pud.

12

I brought the cassette player with us to the clinic, popped in different tapes as she leaned back in the chair, hooked up to the machine. I fast-forwarded through all the Cher tracks and when she closed her eyes, I knew I'd found the right song.

13

Doobie and I sang songs into blank cassette tapes. He loved Elton John.

"Rocket Man." "Bennie And The Jets." We made outfits with aluminum foil—togas, hats, sunglasses. Take it away, Elton, I sang into the hairbrush microphone. Doobie banged his fingers into a pretend piano while I danced. We were Cher and Elton, the glitterati of glam at the Royale Estates.

14

My father came back in the middle of a show, when Cher was in a dance routine with The Jackson 5. She wore a silver jumpsuit with fringe, sparkles and sequins, tight bell-bottoms. All baubles and beads. Legs elastic like rubber bands. "I Want You Back," they sang and "I'll Be There." Then my father opened the front door and walked in.

He stood in front of the television, blocking it.

He said, Cher's a whore.

My mother threw a beer bottle at him and he ducked.

He said, What're you watching this shit for, Greta Anne?

Johnny, MOVE IT!

He wouldn't budge. She threw an ashtray at him.

She yelled, I CAN'T SEE HER!

15

Dear Cher,

On the show last night, you said you wouldn't fold up and die if you didn't have a man. My mother said she wouldn't either. But I think she would. I think she'd shrivel right up and die.

Your fan,

Amber

16

At the wig store on Ventura Boulevard, my mother sat in the chair and took off her scarf. The wig lady measured her head. In the mirror, I saw my mother's swollen face and fingers, her smooth and hairless scalp. The lady fitted a wig onto my mother's hairline, pulled it over her head and down along the nape of her neck.

Strawberry-blonde? she asked.

My mother shook her head no.

The wig lady tried another. She brushed it out and styled it on my mother's head. My mother checked the mirror. She flipped the long, silky black hair over her shoulder and turned to me.

Do I look like Cher? she asked.

Yes, I said.

17

In her room that night, she sang to no one but I heard the words to "I Got You Babe."

18

I couldn't do it anymore, stopped going with my mother to the clinic. She

took the bus alone, carried the cassette player in a bag. When she finished, a nurse put her on the #27 bus. Once she told us how, on the way home, she missed the stop to get off. She'd fallen asleep and the bus circled back around to the front door of the clinic. She'd forgotten she'd had her treatment, stepped off the bus, and waited in a chair until the nurse helped her back outside again.

Like a merry-go-round I couldn't get off, she said.

19

How many times did I hold that wig while she got sick in the toilet?

20

Said he was here to stay. Said he'd take care of us. Said no more coupons for pizza, no more buses to the clinic. When he saw her hairless scalp, he buzzed his own with clippers in support. His copper-red hair fell in small clumps, covering the floor. He gathered up the downy pile in his hands and showed it to her, told her he'd make her a new wig. She laughed, and for a minute there, it sounded like hope in her throat.

21

Doobie liked to play house and only wanted to be called one of two names: Baloney or Mustard. Some days he couldn't decide. I was always the rich aunt, he the orphaned child.

22

Dear Cher,

My mother laughed when you said, Men should be like Kleenex, soft, strong, and disposable. But she let my father stay anyway.

Your fan,

Amber

23

She said, You and Doobie need a parent when I'm gone.

I said, If that's what you want to call him.

24

She'd been sick for two months and I wondered how much time we had left. She wondered what we'd eat after she was gone. Doobie liked his baloney the way I liked my Spam, dipped in raw egg, then fried in oil and smothered with ketchup. I told her not to worry, we'd count ketchup as a vegetable.

25

In Los Angeles, people say the stars are everywhere. Merv Griffin at a stoplight. Tom Selleck at a liquor store. Lynda Carter at the movie theater. The only star we ever wanted to see was Cher.

26

Aunt Ruth arrived from Paso Robles to help, but there wasn't much to do at that point. She stood at the kitchen counter making sandwiches the day my father said he'd had enough and couldn't take it anymore.

That didn't take long, Ruth said.

The pills, the toilet problems, he said.

Don't forget the smell, Ruth said.

He asked if he could have a sandwich before he left. Ruth stared him down. As he walked out, we saw he'd missed a bristly row of hair down the back of his head with the clippers.

Doobie called him Skunk.

27

Ruth and I helped my mother to the toilet. My mother put an arm over each of our shoulders and we hobbled to the bathroom. It's not supposed to be this way, Ruth said to my mother. You should be doing this for me. We eased my mother down.

She winced when her backside bones hit the porcelain. It hurts, she said.

Yes, Greta Anne, Ruth said. Yes, it does.

28

Ruth adjusted my mother's catheter and urine rushed into the bag. She showed us ways to help our mother.

Doobie fed her chocolate pudding. I massaged her feet and hands. We took turns sitting with her in the living room, watching Cher on TV. Sometimes she was too tired to laugh.

Most of the time I stared at the crack in the floor, the rip in the sofa cushion. Too scared to say anything. I believed she would die in front of me if I opened my mouth. I didn't know it then, but years later, I asked myself, Why didn't I say what I wanted to say, what she needed to hear?

29

Somewhere, my father rode his motorcycle down Ventura Boulevard. Somewhere.

30

Dear Cher,

What did you mean last night when you said, God made woman beautiful and foolish; beautiful, that man might love her and foolish, that she might love him? I looked at my mother and her cheeks flushed red, like she knew exactly what you meant.

Your fan,

Amber

31

Does anyone forget the morning they dressed for their mother's funeral? I ironed Doobie's shirt and pants. My father offered to help with his tie. Doobie shook his head. It seemed like he was already reconstructing his childhood, even as he was living it, to include her and not him.

32

When someone dies, everything about them, except for them, remains.

33

What remained of my mother, in her bedroom:

Three celebrity movie magazines.

A hairbrush.

A half-finished crossword puzzle.

Cher cassette tapes.

Two bedpans.

A pack of cigarettes.

Stacks of diapers.

Pain meds.

A wig.

Dirty pajamas, heaped on the floor.

34

On the way to the service, we stopped at the Shell station off the 405. My father told us the story of how he saw Steve McGarrett from Hawaii Five-O pumping gas into his car. He said he made a gun with his fingers, pointed it at Steve McGarrett, and said, Book ‘em, Dan-O!

35

Two things I wanted to tell him. One. Steve McGarrett is a character, played by Jack Lord, the actor. Two, the golden rule in Los Angeles: never speak to a star.

36

It was a "celebration of life" but I couldn't think of anything worse than sitting in the first pew, listening to my father speak about my mother. As if he knew her. As if he were a part of her. I stared at the photograph from her high school graduation on the back of the funeral program. She wore Ruth's white gloves, a dress belted at the waist, her tidy chestnut hair pinned back, off her face.

Her whole life ahead of her, as if waiting for its occasions.

37

After her funeral, Doobie and I sat on the front porch. It was the end of summer. The day's heat blistered the tar on the street. He looked at the sky and wondered why we didn't see stars during the day.

38

Our father unraveled and disappeared again. At the time I thought, How do you love an asshole? That's when I decided: You don't.

39

Ruth moved Doobie and me to the farm she shared with our great-grandpa Will, west of Paso Robles where my mother had grown up. We'd been before, but never without her. Ruth told me to take my mother's old bedroom.

Start unpacking, she said. I moved my mother's 4-H trophies from the dresser and took down the photos taped around the mirror of her and my father as teenagers, so I could see myself.

40

Lying in bed at night, I remembered an evening years ago, before Doobie was born. My mother washed dinner dishes at the sink while I spooned ice cream. My father snuck up, twirled her around, took her soapy hand in his. He touched the small of her back and glided her across the kitchen floor. They moved imperfectly but soon got the rhythm. She didn't know where he was leading her, but her feet knew what to do.

41

Now that she was no longer here, she was everywhere.

42

After Ruth died, Doobie and I cleaned out her attic and found a box containing my mother's cassette player and Cher tapes. One tape said Do Not Erase in her handwriting. I snapped it into the player. Her voice unspooled into the room. A capella. Bold and fearless. My chest bloomed. Doobie sat next to me on the floor. All the songs came rushing back to us and we leaned into each other as we sang along.

We knew all the words by heart.

POETRY

I Live In A Large Week To Week Motel

Romus Simpson

I live in a large week to week motel
all of us in the street
or from the street
etching incoherent translucent
smoking in the day vacancies
afternoon traffic and the low roar of death
I am but a girl
and my mother is changing gender
becoming the men she knew
touching us less and less
each day she wanders farther across the parking lot
out of sight sometimes
each day the baby cries longer
she is going to give up
I want to hold her and tell her I love her
that we won't fight or want so many things
but she is 6 rooms away down the balcony
with the door closed

DIARY

Digging to Wonderland

David Trinidad

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These entries come from *Digging to Wonderland*, forthcoming from Turtle Point Press in 2022. In that otherworld between prose poem and memoir, David Trinidad chases the White Rabbit of memory further and further into the past: inside the mysteries of adolescence, childhood, and family history.

Mart Crowley

to be first—
the hardest thing of all
—James Krusoe

In one of the books he signed for me, he wrote, "For dear David." So he liked me after all. That was too much to hope for, or take in: that one of my heroes could feel affection for me. And hero he was. He'd had fame, of a magnitude a poet would be a dope to hope for, in the late 1960s, with his play *The Boys in the Band*. The first to make homosexuals visible, multi-dimensional, real. I'd read it, and seen the movie, when I was in high school, never dreaming I would one day meet and get to know him. He was unable, with subsequent plays, to replicate his earlier success. And what was at first proclaimed a breakthrough, was later attacked (due to changing politics) for its negative portrayal of gay men. So there was a sadness about him. Ennui.

A frequent impatient sigh (which I mistook for dissatisfaction with me), as if he were only just tolerating being alive. Being a survivor. He'd suffered the loss of close friends: actress Natalie Wood of drowning; Howard Jeffrey, on whom the character of Harold in *The Boys in the Band* was based, of AIDS. When I'd call, he'd be agitated about something on the news. "The usual ugliness," he said. (I stole that for one of my poems.) So glamour was strictly rearview mirror. We met, as I recall, through Lypsinka, that impersonator of bygone glamour. And maintained a friendship long-distance, via the telephone. Me in New York and then Chicago, he in Los Angeles and then New York. I was respectful, careful not to trespass on his celebrity. And he (I can see now) was always kind. I kept (of course) his notes and postcards. He once sent me Celeste Holm's autograph (when he was reading my collaborative epic about *All About Eve*). Once he wrote: "I so love our chats in the evenings" (further evidence that he liked me). He asked me to critique the text he was writing for the children's book Eloise Takes a Bawth. (I can still hear him mockingly draw out the word bawth.) A section I particularly liked was nixed by illustrator Hilary Knight (who lacked camp humor): Eloise seductively reclining on the edge of her overflowing bathtub like Marilyn Monroe atop Niagara Falls in the poster for *Niagara*. He was funniest when his encyclopedic knowledge of the movies collided with his languid wit. Sometimes after our conversations I would jot down things he'd said. "It's clear Achilles is as gay as a Disney cow." (He was watching the animated *Hercules* on TV.) "The more things change the less they change." (Uttered with his signature sigh.) A producer friend, Arnold Stiefel, was his "Sunday partner in boredom." Once when I was in Los Angeles, I drove my rental car to his place on Laurel Avenue. A duplex, as I recall. Spanish style. The gate opened onto a tiled patio with hanging vines and shocking pink bougainvillea. Inside: wood ceiling beams, a sofa with wide black-and-white stripes, ornate wrought-iron staircase rail. But I romanticize. He served sparkling water with slices of lime (we were both sober). And on a Mediterranean ceramic plate: green and black olives, cheese and crackers. Behind the sofa, on a long table: several rows of photographs, in silver frames, of his famous friends: Natalie Wood, Robert Wagner, Dominick Dunne, the original cast of *The Boys in the Band* (most of them dead of AIDS). On a wall in the upstairs hall: a framed costume design (in muted watercolors) from *Boys*: the cowboy, hips cocked in a suggestive stance, thumbs in the pockets of his tight pants. I admired it when I went up to use the bathroom. He took me

to dinner at a restaurant in West Hollywood. His body language changed as we walked through the door: I am someone of importance. (He had, after all, made entrances with movie stars.) I'd never seen anyone transform themselves like that. It was both impressive and gratuitous. After he moved back to New York (to the same neighborhood where Garbo lived out her later years), we talked one or two times. But then I let the friendship lapse, which, now that he's gone, I regret.

In one of his obits online, I read that, not long before he died, when *The Boys in the Band* won a Tony for best revival, he said, "You have given me peace." Too much to hope for, perhaps, but I'll take it on faith.

1968

The porchlight will be on, waiting for me, when I come home from babysitting. Almost every Saturday night I sit for a couple who live one street over from us, at the end of a cul-de-sac. The wife teaches ballet. The husband is handsome. They have two young girls. I am fifteen years old. I earn money babysitting (and also mow lawns) so I can buy books about the movies. *The Films of Greta Garbo*. *The Films of Marilyn Monroe*. *Judy: The Films and Career of Judy Garland*. *The Academy Awards: A Pictorial History*. The girls have Barbie dolls. I watch them play. Even pick up a doll and slip her into a dress; it's safe, in this context. After they go to sleep, I sit in an armchair in the family room and watch *Mannix* on their TV. Mike Connors has dark hair and is handsome, like the husband. Then I watch Cinema 13 (on channel 13), the only place you can see adult-themed movies (albeit edited): *The Pawnbroker* (about a concentration camp survivor), *Mondo Cane* (shocking), *90° in the Shade* (steamy), *A Taste of Honey* (about a pregnant teenager), and *One Potato, Two Potato* (about an interracial relationship). When the couple comes home, the husband always drives me to my house. Why? It's only a block and a half away. The world is a dangerous place, but surely our suburb is still safe. Does his wife insist? What do we talk about, if anything, on that short drive? I can smell cigarettes, alcohol on his breath—they've been to a party. I look over at his profile, lit by the dashboard, framed in the window like a leading man. Houses glide past, in darkness, behind him.

Our house is yellow. The porchlight glows. The handsome husband waits for me to turn the key and go inside, before he drives off.

My Mother's Love Letters

Over the greatness of such space
Steps must be gentle.
—Hart Crane

When my mother died in 1996, my sister handed me a bundle of letters wrapped in a white ribbon. I knew these to be my parents' love letters, which my mother had always kept in the drawer of her bedside table. "Dad's just going to throw them out," Jenny said. "You should take them." I brought them home (from California to New York), but couldn't bear to read them. Still grieving, I was afraid they would be too intimate, that they would only bring more pain. And that they might tell me things about my parents I didn't care to know. In 2000, when I sold my papers to Fales Library at NYU, I included the bundle of letters, still unread, still wrapped in the white ribbon. Maybe someone in the future might be interested in these, I thought, but I'll never be able to read them. Fourteen years later, however, when I was conducting research at Fales (on Ed Smith, whose papers are also archived there), I asked to see the bundle of letters. I felt differently by then, thought that I might be able to look at them someday. I untied the white ribbon and took pictures of the letters and envelopes, but did not examine them closely. These pictures sat in a folder on the desktop of my computer for another five years, till the fall of 2019, when I read and transcribed them for the purpose of writing this. I'd always thought that the bundle included letters by both of my parents, but discovered there were only four letters from my mother to my father. (This didn't register when I photographed them at Fales.) The letters are written in blue ink in what I've elsewhere called my mother's "large, slightly loopy handwriting slanting towards the right," on stationery with scalloped, gold-tinged edges. They tell the following story:

On Friday, August 4, 1950, Joyce, aged nineteen, takes an all-night train from Albuquerque, New Mexico, to Pasadena, California. She travels with her half-brother Jack, who's eleven. Jack meets a boy his age on the train

and is too wound up to sleep. He finally dozes off after eleven o'clock. But is up again at 4:30 a.m. Joyce doesn't get much sleep. They arrive in Pasadena Saturday morning at 7:00 and are met by a man from the paint factory (a friend of her stepfather), who loans Joyce his Lincoln. They stay with their grandmother at 555 West Montecito Avenue in Sierra Madre. Joyce has been dating Rupert, an engineering student at the University of New Mexico. At 1:15 that afternoon, as her grandmother takes a nap, Joyce writes him a letter. (She will write three more over the next three days.) She is in the living room, playing records as she writes. The Lincoln, she tells him, "drives like a dream." So far she hasn't stalled. She asks if he's heard the song "Count Every Star"; it fits the spot they're in. "I could have cried when I said good-by to you at the station," she says. "I can't tell you enough how much I love you & wish I was in your arms." When her grandmother wakes up, she takes her shopping in Pasadena. Her grandmother buys a rose sweater; Joyce buys a dark green sweater and "some unmentionables." The sweater will go nicely with her new skirts. She also buys their return tickets—she can't wait to get back to Albuquerque. Back to Rupert. Not much happens during her week-long stay; she worries that her letters are boring. Sunday morning, she accompanies her grandmother to church. ("A regular saint, don't you think?") She visits two girlfriends, Mabel and Marjie. Mabel has gotten married against her parents' wishes, to an eighteen-year-old named Tom, who "doesn't have a good job." But they have a cute apartment; Tom is good-looking and nice. "They seemed very much in love so I pray it works out."

Mabel and Tom, August 4, 1950

Marjie tells Joyce that three-fourths of the girls in their high school class are now married. "We decided we would be old maids forever if we couldn't do better than marrying a ditch digger."

On Monday, her stepfather calls to tell her he's about to sign papers to buy a house on Hermosa Drive in Albuquerque. Joyce is happy about this, and knows Rupert will be, too. She starts getting things packed and ready to be shipped as soon as they move into the house. Her stepfather tells her

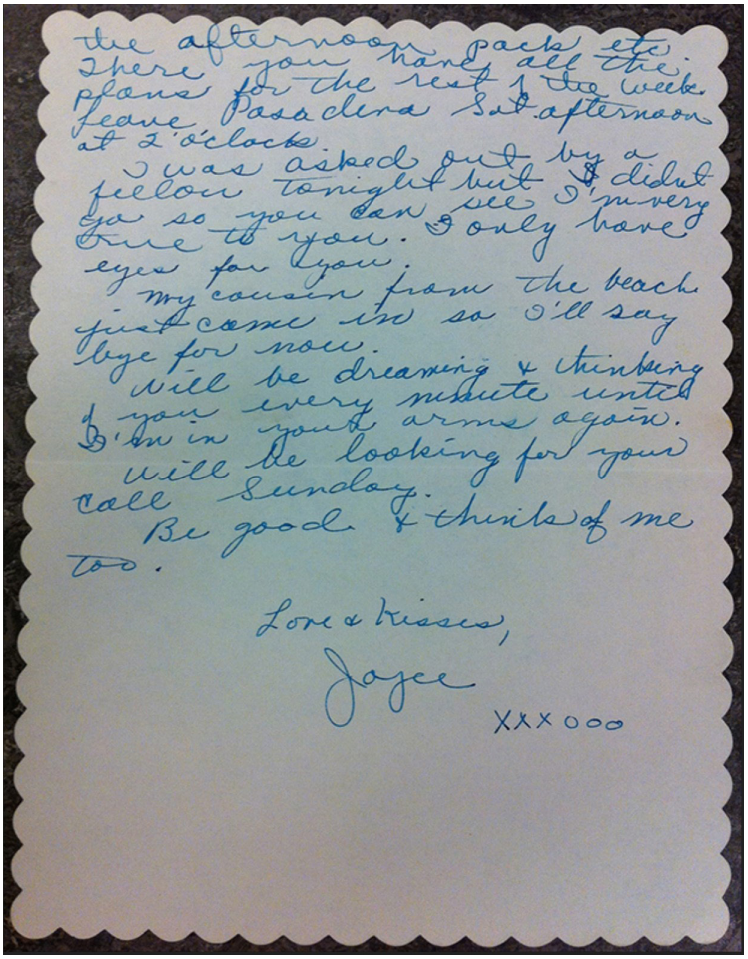
that Rupert helped him out at his store—unpacking boxes of paint. "I hope you aren't working too hard." The next day, Tuesday, she receives a card from Rupert. "You have no idea how happy I was. I bet I've read it over 20 times." She is glad to hear that Rupert is as lonely as she is. "I don't feel so bad."

Joyce and Marjie, circa 1949

On Wednesday they have plans to go to the cemetery where Joyce's mother and grandfather are buried. Eighty miles round trip, in the borrowed Lincoln. "Kind of dread it as it's always so sad, but no telling when I'll be back this way." She wonders if Rupert has seen the movie *Rocketship X-M*. "Bet it was good." A "fellow" asks her out on a date, but she refuses; she only has eyes for Rupert. "Will be dreaming & thinking of you every minute until I'm in your arms again."

203 Hermosa Dr. NE, Albuquerque, New Mexico, circa 1950

My mother's love letters are not boring—at least not to me. They bring her alive for a moment. A teenager listening to pop songs, shopping for a new sweater, gossiping with high school friends. And missing her boyfriend. She will attend UNM (majoring in Home Ec), but drop out after one semester—her stepfather needed help at the paint store. She and Rupert will get married in four months, on December 7, the ninth anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor. My brother will be born nine months later. (It was 1950; they waited.) Then I will be born in 1953, after they move to Los Angeles, where my father will start working for Lockheed. Hard to believe I was so afraid to read these letters. Rather than uncomfortably intimate, they are simply sweet. "I'll be so glad when I see you again. I'll make you kiss me a million times." I



the afternoon packs etc.
There you have all the
plans for the rest of the week.
Leave Pasadena Sat. afternoon
at 2 o'clock.
I was asked out by a
fellow tonight but I didnt
go so you can see I'm very
true to you. I only have
eyes for you.
My cousin from the beach
just came in so I'll say
bye for now.
Will be dreaming & thinking
of you every minute until
I'm in your arms again.
Will be looking for your
call Sunday.
Be good & think of me
too.

Love & Kisses,
Joyce

XXX ooo

My mother's handwriting

wondered why my father's card, which she was so happy to receive, was not with her letters. My mother was so sentimental; she saved everything. I wouldn't be surprised if the white ribbon wrapped around the letters was from one of their wedding presents. I looked up the song she mentions, "Count Every Star." A 1950 hit by Ray Anthony and His Orchestra. Listened to it on YouTube. A lovesick crooning number. The lyrics do mirror my mother's predicament: "Heaven knows I miss you." And looked up *Rocketship X-M*. Released in May 1950, it was, according to Wikipedia, the first outer space adventure of the post-World War II era. Starring Lloyd Bridges, it tells the story of an expedition to the Moon (hence "X-M") that goes awry; the crew ends up on Mars instead. I watched it on YouTube: pure 1950s sci-fi cheesiness. Not to mention sexism. Bridges refers to the female astronaut, Osa Massen, as "the weaker sex." My mother's world. Massen: "I suppose you think that women should only cook and sew and bear children." Bridges: "Isn't that enough?" It would take nineteen years (twice my mother's age) for real astronauts to reach the Moon—a prospect my young parents could only imagine. I've al-

ways taken pride that they landed on the Moon on July 20, my sixteenth birthday.

"The Happiest Place on Earth"

Leaving the park, I would buy rock candy at the Candy Palace on Main Street. Last stop at the end of a long and exhausting (albeit magical) day. It came in a clear plastic box with a hinged lid and gold lettering. A little box of sweet white crystals that I could suck on the silent drive home. Over the years, I've collected bits of memorabilia: a map of Tom Sawyer's Island, a wooden nickel from Frontierland, a silver Tinker Bell charm. A dozen Disneykins—I had them as a child—tiny, colorful, hand-painted figures. My favorite was Alice, in her blue dress and white pinafore. Several oversized maps of the entire park, one of which, framed, hangs in the stairway of my coach house. I pass it numerous times every day. Fantasyland was where I most wanted to be—"the happiest land of all." I loved the Alice in Wonderland ride, though the fall down the rabbit hole wasn't as dramatic as I would have liked. Peter Pan's flight over London at night was always enchanting. And the part in Mr. Toad's Wild Ride where you enter a dark tunnel and a train comes speeding toward you, always scary. Did I scream like the other children? My friend Jeffery recently told me that the Mr. Toad attraction no longer exists

Cinderella's glass slipper

at the Magic Kingdom. All things must vanish, but not Mr. Toad! The merry-go-round and flying elephants were for kids. The spinning teacups could make you sick, especially if you'd eaten a tuna fish sandwich at the restaurant on Captain Hook's ship (sponsored by Chicken of the Sea, the brand with a mermaid on the can). You could get your name stitched on a felt hat, though I never did. I envied the languid plumes that adorned them. As a child, Jeffery was terrified of going through the whale's mouth, the portal to Storybook Land—all those miniature imaginary dwellings along a canal. "To your right are the houses of the three little pigs," the guide "steering" the boat would announce. There was Geppetto's workshop. And there, at the top of a hill, Cinderella's pink castle.

I still have the little glass slipper I bought the last time I was there. Keep it in a small blue Tiffany's box, like a piece of valuable jewelry. I regret that I gave away, in the eighties, a souvenir my brother got in Adventureland when we were young: a black plastic tiki god pendant, with two red rhinestones for eyes.

Brothers Five

It is said that my Portuguese great-grandfather, Manuel Sousa Trindade, immigrated to the United States in the 1880s from the village of Cedros on Flores, the westernmost island in the Azores. And that one by one, he brought over four of his five younger brothers. (Nothing is known about the brother who stayed behind.) Too poor to buy his way out of the army, Manuel had been forced to spend two years in the Portuguese African colony of Angola. He wanted to spare his siblings this arduous service. Plus, Flores was a rugged island—despite its abundance of flowers. It is said that the wind blows there all the time, that the sea is stingy with its fish, and that the land yields produce stubbornly. (As a poet, I can't help but be proud that my forebear came from an island named "Flowers.") The five brothers settled in California, in the San Joaquin Valley, around the town of Merced. They worked on farms, plowing and planting barley and wheat; drove freight wagons; found jobs in the logging industry. (It is said that one of the brothers eventually became a "sweet potato king.") Manuel married Louise Jacinto, who'd been born in a Mariposa gold mining camp in 1872. They

moved to Oakland, had one son, Rupert Manuel, my grandfather (who was kind to me). It is said (I grew up hearing this story) that Louise changed the spelling of their name from "Trindade" to "Trinidad" because she was mad at some relatives and wanted to distinguish herself from them. My father recently told me that the real reason was convenience: "Trinidad" was a common name in the phone book, and people found the Portuguese spelling confusing. (Still, the rift makes for a more interesting anecdote.) Manuel owned a bar, but sickness (did he drink?) compelled him to sell it. He ended up sweeping gutters in Berkeley, until he fell from a truck and could no longer work. My father remembers him as lame and arthritic; he had difficulty climbing stairs. He died in 1946 at the age of eighty-nine. My father showed me a photograph (which I took a picture of) of the five brothers, taken in Merced around 1890. All of them looking very serious. And all of them seriously dressed: sack suits (with only the top button of the jacket buttoned, as was the custom), detachable starched collars and ties, watch chains draped across vests, handkerchiefs in pockets. Their well-worn shoes give them away. Manuel (with mustache) is seated in front, large hands resting on his thighs. Agostino is sitting to his right. Standing behind them: Joseph Maria, Ventura (who will die in a hunting accident; someone wrote an "X" above his head), and Antonio, the youngest, who looks like Rimbaud.

Manuel Trinidade and brothers, Merced, California, circa 1890

VISUAL ART

Four Snacks

Sophia Le Fraga

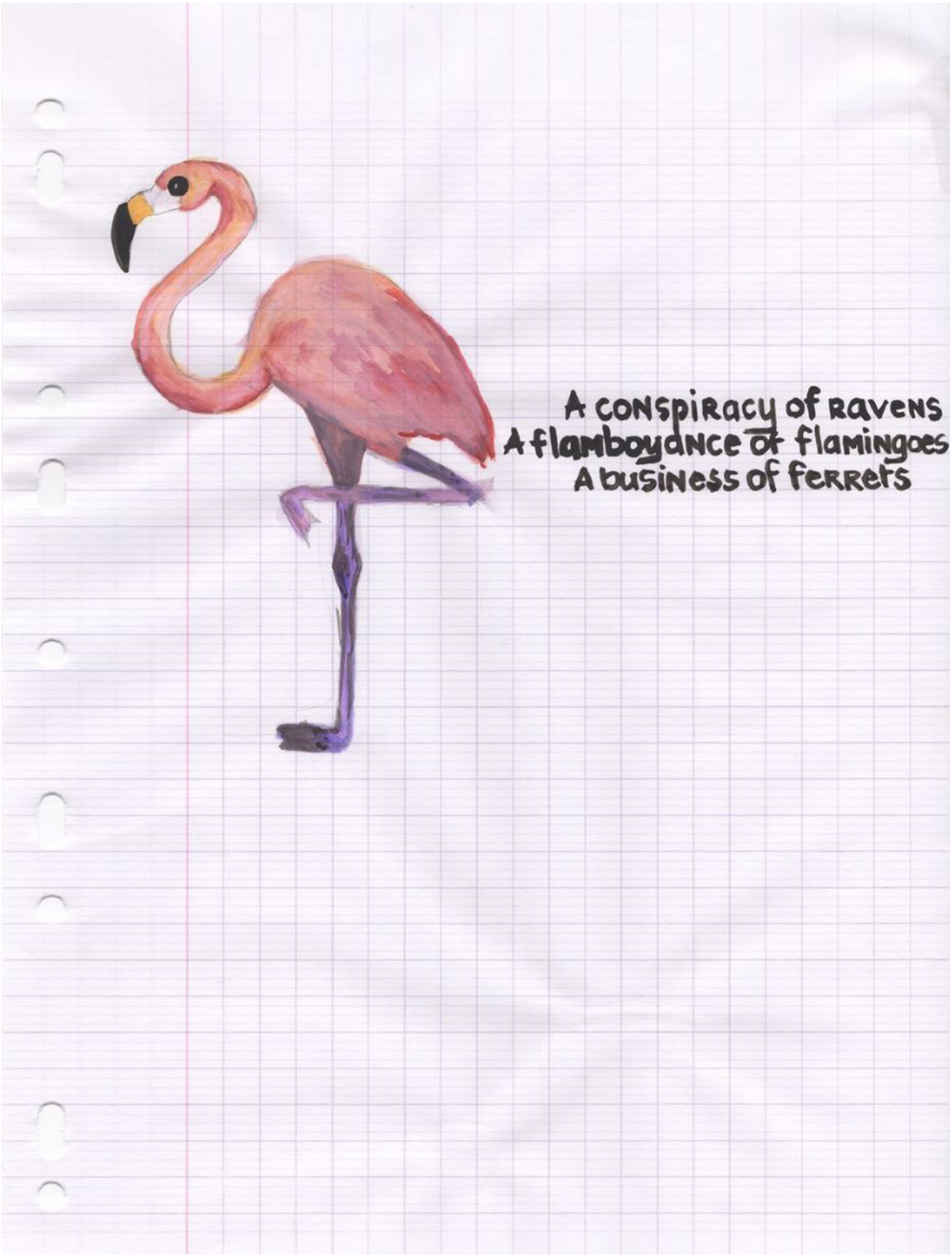
These *Snacks* are pages from my journal, where lately I've had nothing to say.

In the early days of the pandemic, we turned to video platforms like Houseparty, FaceTime, and Zoom to mimic IRL social gatherings. But as the months went on, these forms of communication quickly proved insufficient and exhausting.

As I began to feel like communication was slipping away from me, I switched off my digital technology and turned to the analog. I found myself sketching the emojis that I used frequently in my texts and chats: like the hibiscus, which reminds me of my grandparents' house in Guatemala City, and the flamingo, of which I'm terrified in real life, although I find its electric pinks mesmerizing in the iPhone rendering.

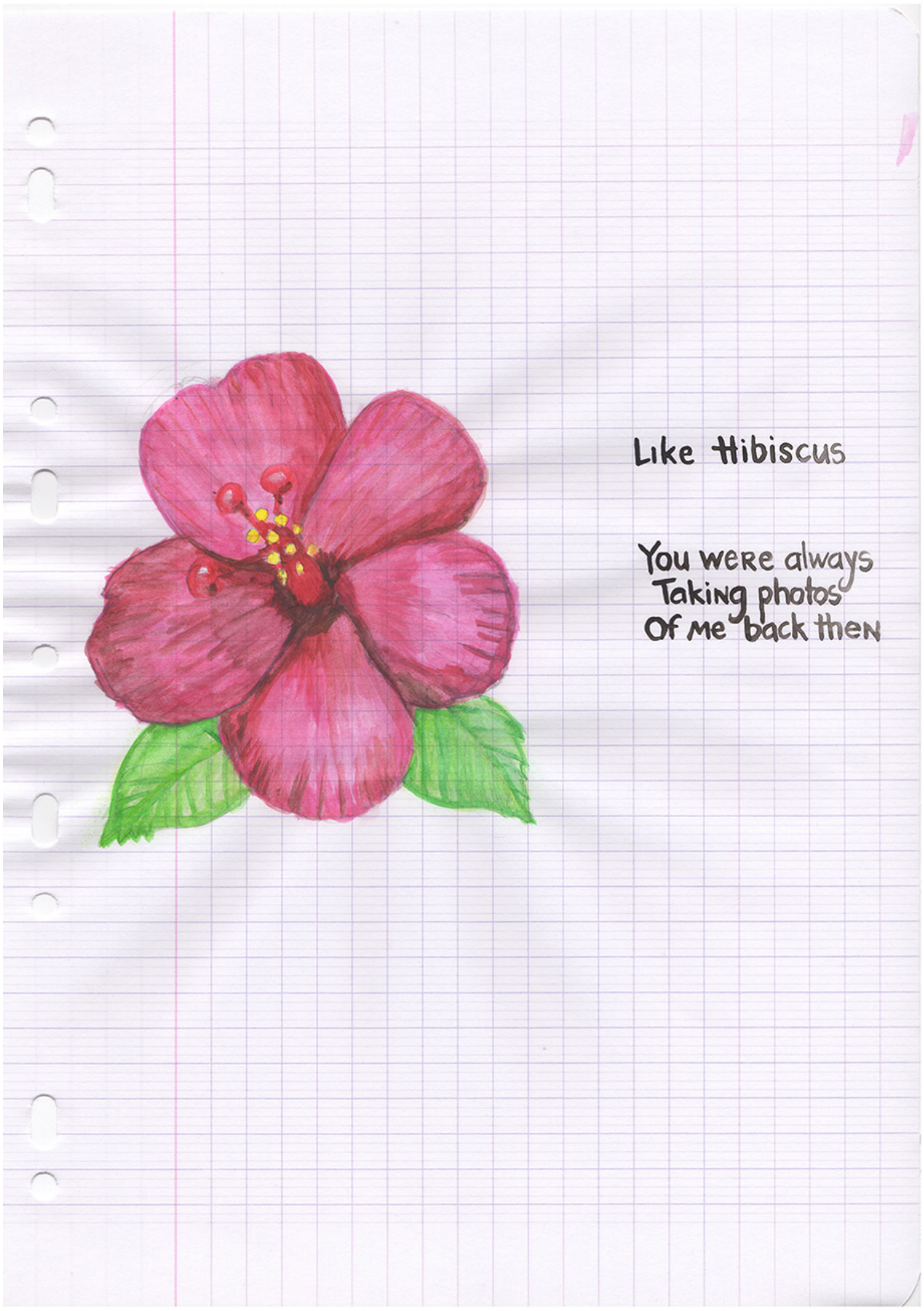
Painting emojis, these predetermined pictures that exist in our keyboards, became my way of slowing down.

–Sophia Le Fraga

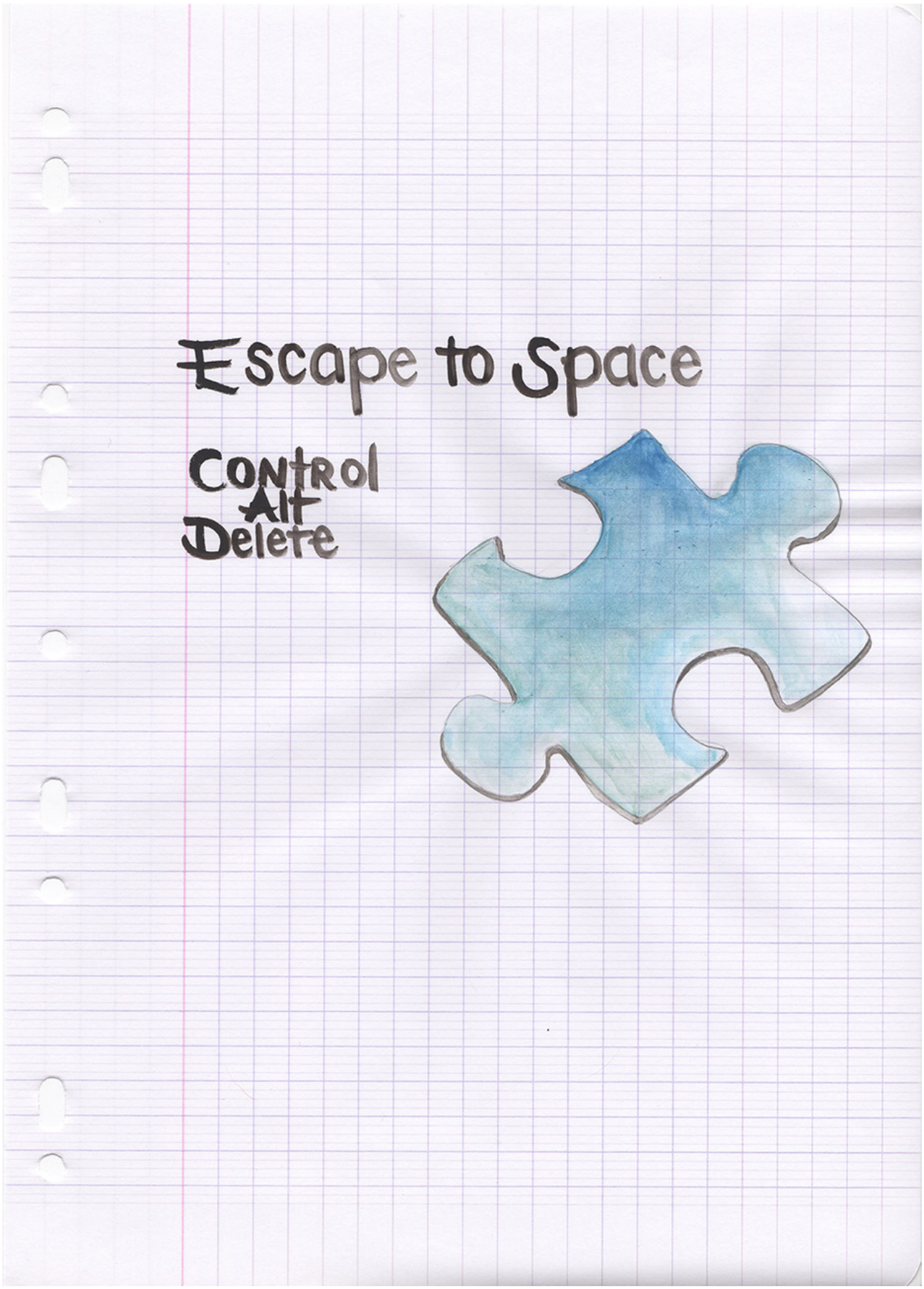


Houseparty (Things I've Learned) (2020) Sophia Le Fraga

But You’re so Soft (2020) Sophia Le Fraga



Like Hibiscus (2020) Sophia Le Fraga



Like Hibiscus (2020) Sophia Le Fraga

ESSAYS/NONFICTION

skilled black hands braid geometric insignia as poetry

fahima ife

A comment on the precision of a geometric line, the craft of the skilled black beautician, could be heard as sublime recognition of a distinctly embodied black poetics.[1] All beauticians do different work, just as all poets do different work. There is the line and a matter of breaking the line, of bending it. When the line stops its monotonous straightforward projectile trajectory into space, when it folds back on itself, opens a new world, when it bows outward, when it appears to arrive and depart at the same time, this is its curvature. Then there is a black stylist's hand fashioning the line as formations of hair, grouping hair as bends of braids, rendering braids as geometric ornamentation.

Or bent hands curl onto themselves, spider a vine of follicle. Or, twisted fingers manipulate woolen tentacles. The daily performance, the manipulation of a full crown of hair, woven into intricate mathematical dimension, suggests an insinuation of quantum mechanics. What the black beautician's hands are able to do, out of necessity, is derive an asymptotic dance with-

1 This essay was born inside a compliment Fred Moten made to Renee Gladman about her craft, her poetics in the sentence, in line with the deftness of hand of a black beautician who braids hair, in a conversation on the occasion of the release of Renee Gladman's One Long Black Sentence *presented by 192 Books and Paula Cooper Gallery on July 28, 2020.*

in undulating rows of hair. The line dips in the formation of a braid, spirals, radiates outward to indicate a curl. To braid another black person's natural hair, the skill, the years of practice, detailed in the protective styling of the braid, is a matter of fine arts fingering, not mastery, the refusal to let go of an old West African tradition.

> The technology of the Africans, iron-working, wood-carving, weaving, etc., died out quickly in the United States. Almost every material aspect of African culture took a new less obvious form or was wiped out altogether.[2]

It's the texture of a black line.[3] The clean line precision of a black hair stylist who braids tightly coiled hair is not the same precision a poet hopes to accomplish in their lineation. There really is no comparison between what a black beautician does with their hands, the type of public recognition they receive (if they receive any at all), and what a publicly acknowledged black poet does with their hands. And, only comparison. For the black hair stylist, as for the black writer, there is a choice to attend school, to train, to develop further a craft as mundane, beautiful, and necessary as braiding black hair, as writing black poems. It is not really a choice as much as an obstacle or imposition. If money is an issue, as money is always an issue, is it really a choice to attend school for the purpose of developing a craft in order to make money? Some black hair stylists attend school; others do not. Some black poets attend school; others do not. It is a matter of practice, paired possibly with skill, protracted practice in making the handiwork beautiful. It's a matter of excess time, who has access to it, what is made through it.

• _____

I walk outside and see three young black girls across the street on a porch. Today their long box braids are fuchsia, red, turquoise. Each girl adorned fantastic. To the left, my neighbor, the same age as me, sits on her

2 *Amiri Baraka,* Blues People *(New York: Harper Perennial, 1999),15-16.*

3 *Fred Moten, "Chromatic Saturation,"* Universal Machine *(Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 157.*

porch in between the legs of her friend who braids her maroon and black hair. I drive around the corner, see an older black woman whose graying hair is twisted in the fingers of some beloved. On the next street over, a black beauty salon. This world of braids and hair braiding is all around me, has always been around me. When I was a kid, my mother tried to teach me how to braid hair, but I was never good at it. What my cousins could do, probably still do, with their hands is the type of unremunerated practice they do out of love, sometimes for compensation too, though they have never received any type of monetary public recognition for it.

> Hands,
> how many?
> There are hands that hold
> nothing but light, and hands
> that stake claims as if staking were logic.[4]

The fine finger manipulation of the black beautician, whether trained or not, whether paid or not, is a matter of deft work, breath work, what is done for the purposes of craft, what is done to strengthen a skill, a daily demonstration of beauty, serially drawn out. I wonder if a black person who braids hair, who styles hair with the same type of bold geometric precision (bending, breaking) celebrated in contemporary poetry, someone who braids hair on their front porch in the summer heat, if they have ever received the annual $100,000 braid prize or the $625,000 MacArthur braid grant, and if so, what they did with the money? There is no comparison between black beauticians and black poets in terms of money. If it's a matter of numbers, for all the black beauticians inside this country, all the black poets inside this country, whether acknowledged or not, beauticians possibly have an opportunity to make more money. But it's not really a comparison with what a black beautician can make, in terms of money, over a lifetime. More an engagement with what the hands make. I am interested in how both handicrafts, though similar in dexterity, are not often thought of on the same terms when it comes to what is thought of as art.

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4 *Dawn Lundy Martin,* Discipline *(Brooklyn: Nightboat Books, 2011), 28.*

the Word the Nommo
put inside the fabric's
woven secret,[5]

Like when Fred Moten says to Renee Gladman that he thinks her ability to weave a sentence along the same lines as the fine precision of those black beautician's hands that practice braid work. I appreciate his compliment, as someone who comes from nothing other than a host of hands that could make little to nothing in their spare time, if they had any spare time, other than small handicrafts, like a braid in natural black hair. I repeat a story about my mother's parents, their inability to read and write and how it relates to my practice as a writer. I sometimes believe the precision I learned is all a matter of my own study. No one can teach me how to write a poem, just as no one could teach me how to braid properly. I have had to build a world of words inside the vast interiority of my imagination, practice it for at least 15 or 20 years before assuming any type of desire to share what little I can make with others. But the origins in the precision of playing, inside myself, for so long, for developing the type of protective precision with a similar manual and mental dexterity as a braid worker, came from outside. The adornment of the braid spoke to my "inner god," to borrow Dawn Lundy Martin's phrase, for the first time when we were young, when I sat and watched black women braid black hair, adorn that hair with beads.[6]

At the upper reach of
each run I
reach earthward, fingers blurred[7]

• _____

It's all a matter of time. When we talk about a black poet's line breaks, improvisation in black jazz, the asymptotic curvature of coming close, of al-

5 *Nathaniel Mackey, "Song of the Andoumboulou: 3,"* Eroding Witness *(selva oscura press, reprint edition, 2018), 42.*

6 *Dawn Lundy Martin, "What Money Can't Buy,"* Ploughshares *143 (2020): 64-76.*

7 *Nathaniel Mackey, "Ohnedaruth's Day Begun,"* Eroding Witness*, 79*

most arriving, of remaining just enough far off to try again. What the hands can do in space with raw materials, metallic and plastic tools, makes time bend. It occurs to me the type of geometric braid work of a quantum black beautician is a matter of minimalism, repetition, the looping of a recurrence set in motion on the first run. In the time it takes to fashion a series of rows and sequences, a world opens up, a way inside adornment, previously unacknowledged or obscured. It's like my student, who after I asked how and when it is possible to bend something in this physical plane, make it exist as something else, the first thought that came to her mind was the black beauty salon, the skill of the beautician who can make her hair a galaxy of someplace else, the way the entire salon silences itself in the wake of all that beauty. I had said nothing of a beautician, or a braid, the handiwork, only asked about bending and this is where she carried us.

If poetry is a practice in minimalism, the economy of the word, adornment on a scale of nothing and everything, then what do we make of those braided adornments on the tops, sides, backs, and fronts of black people's heads? When Fred Moten complimented Renee Gladman on her level of skill, compared her work, her fine hand manipulation, to the craft of a black beautician, a new room opened up inside me. A room with walls as curvilinear formations, cobalt stained glass windows finely recessed inside the terra cotta, warm bamboo flooring sturdy underfoot, minimalist sprawl of rugs and books and floor pillows and salt lamps and incense and tea and music summoning me up close. I was not inside a beauty salon as much as I was inside the primordial beauty salon, someone's home, a black living room, or a way inside everywhere else.

The fine line precision of a braid, not any braid but specifically a braid in the hair of someone whose West African ancestry is traceable in the root, unlike any other hair on this planet (specific and multiple at the same time). The fine line precision of a black beautician's hands, to take the already remarkably dense complexity of our sacred fiber, a bundle of natural proteins sprawling from someone's scalp, spiral it into something equally remarkable and new. It's the same with these colonial languages, like English, what black and brown people have had to fashion through them.

Hand heavy with the mist of your
own belated breath, as you come up
you feel your mouth fill with graveyard

dirt, the skinny fingers of dawn[8]

We make beauty out of everything, with our hands, make worlds flourish through nothing other than an incessant obsession with making something out of nothing. Like Renee Gladman's transmutation of the word, to get us out and off this language, to take us back to the crude line, to etch an entirely new composition. Like all that liquid fabulation, the juice she squeezes inside her lines. Like a braid, Fred Moten says, the entangled animation of an idea situated someplace feral in the beyond of language. Or, Amiri Baraka argues, our indigenous black traditions in this country, emerged as an amalgamation of an inherited (African) sense of style and an inherited (American) ontology. The braid is one of those remaining African cosmologies we have refused to let go, even in thinking about art, or talking about black poetry.

The braid as protection, or protective styling, retains moisture. Maybe what some black poets are able to do is made possible through an inherited sense of braid work, whether we actually use our hands that way or not, as in an evolutionary maternal skill—our mother hands—passed down through all these years of being in this settler colonial nightmare, of having to use our hands, manipulate our fingers, the fine precision skill of years of inherited labor, reclaiming the service work of our ancestors to serve us instead. What is made moist inside the braid is fluid inside the poem. The level of moisture, as it lives in these lines sometimes, rushes off the page, rushes forth in me, in my eyes and throat and below, a feeling of liquid. I swallow before the urge takes complete hold.

And, I know black poets are not the only ones whose lines evoke a mood of water, just as I know black people are not the only people to braid hair. I know this. It's just the resources, what is available at hand, the fiber in the making of the matter—it's so different. There is no other hair as specific as natural black hair, or this proclivity we have to adorn. Just as there is no other lineage that is the same as having inherited a language, or a series of colonial languages, at the same time our mother tongues were dispersed as wide as any outside might carry. Loss, the wet feeling of loss inside our throats, not only a blue sound held in the belly or the mood of solfége, but also a texture, a saliva of sensation, the held over mood of weeping lost inside all that brass.

8 *Nathaniel Mackey, "Ghede Poem,"* Eroding Witness*, 26-27.*

There is no other lineage of language the same as what indigenous black and brown people have had to make out of these metallic sounding languages, mellifluous and fertile as our tongues remain. Were it fire, were it anything other than leftover, held over, land mass—mangled inside our throats. Were it anything other than a no longer far away syntax, what we yearn for. To make beauty out of all this horror is an aesthetic no one else can approach. There is nothing beautiful inside the torment of this sound, as it haunts us, though we ride around inside it daily because we must. We play in it. After a blue note, purple is a transmutation of all that indigo made fuchsia (and I can never spell this word right on the first try, though it is not a matter of spelling as much as getting there), here we are inside an ineffable color held over in a sound of all the water inside our throats. It's the way Rashaan Roland Kirk can take three saxophones, play them at the same time, weave together the sound and the feeling inside "Inflated Tear," all the water in the mood of a name like that, make the horns wail in unison, a tripartite feeling of water (and more than water), the tumescence of a tear as a braid. If you catch yourself listening to this song at three a.m., then maybe you catch a feeling of a braid. If a braid is made of water, if a line is bent as fluid, if a poem is made of gas, if a hand is deft as air.

I keep meeting people and we have these conversations about the interplay between water and air. It's something about a Laban notation I still do not understand, though I'll get there. There are sustained movements, and there are quick movements. Some gestures float and others sink. It's a counterbalance. As one rises, the other spreads outward. What sprawls between us is all a matter of how the body moves in space, or how the hands move in space. Were the hand a mechanism of loiter, then the fingers would twirl as a child might, before a mirror, unrelenting in their spiral, aggregate strands of otherwise disparate hair, twirl the strands together. La Marr Jurelle Bruce might say the hands, they twirl a possible adornment on a formerly unadorned head. The twirl of the fingers makes spiral a means of elation.[9] There is so little left in the wet room of recrudescence, what with the constant threat of flooding, of being flooded. What momentary flee space exists inside adornment? The way a hand might hold a pen then clasp a line by way of clutch. What water lives inside the braid is siphoned off as

9 La Marr Jurelle Bruce, "Shore, Unsure: Loitering as a Way of Life," GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies *25(2): 352-361.*

POETRY

“Towards a Theory of Perception” and “The First Writer in My Family”

Andrew Navarro

Towards a Theory of Perception

I’m the kind of guy who sets his standards
based on the standards of others.
There’s a theory to that. Much like
there’s a theory of perception
that states if you’re the type to live life
predominantly gripping things
with your right hand and your right hand
only, you’ll find, upon reflection, a life
lived grasping only half the picture.
Hence, why I brush each tooth in my mouth
with the left whenever I remember
break the routine, Andrew. A morning mantra
meant to begin the day in a brand new light.
Of course, light is only half of it too. Which is why
I end most nights standing in the living room
to remind myself how darkness is natural to the world.
How its presence subdues everything in place;

the walls and coffee table softening in the dark.
All form becoming formless in shadow. This is a property
of stillness. In it, all things become heavy—flattened
by the absence of sound. O how we love our sounds.

The First Writer in My Family

Some claimed dementia, and others imagination, but all conceded that my great grandfather's aberrations toward the end of his life only matched his threadbare sweaters and tattered caps. If you were inclined to spectacle, then shadowing Jimmy, as he was known, would have been a good course of action. With preternatural fashion, my great grandfather changed upon crossing the threshold of particular rooms. As Monsieur Lucas, he riveted cafes with his rambunctious and explosive displays—*Qui qui Excusez moi! Monsieur Anotha' sandweech s'il vous plait!* Or as Hanz, a drunk Austrian, who frequented the bars in constant search of his friend—*Fernando Gonzales. Have you seen him? My good friend Fernando?* A suspicious man, he would hang copies of his manuscripts over balconies, exposing the pages to the thrashing of wind. Some considered him a genius, but his granddaughter never understood why he was held in such esteem by anyone. His granddaughter, my mother, hated him, she would explain shortly after his death. He'd spent most of his days in the closet, arguing with each jacket and coat the few months of the year he was ever home. At night—she said—all I remember him doing, in the dark, alone, was yelling into the mirror, angry and weeping.

FICTION

Lit

Alex Espinoza

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Here's my body, which I give over to you. Fashion it. Mold it. Shape it into whatever you want. My flesh is your flesh. Consume it. Let it give you strength. You have an appetite for a body like mine. I know this all too well. That's why men like you pay me for sex, and I'm not ashamed to admit this. I'm good at it. I know what I'm doing. I can take command. Or, if you'd rather, if you'd like to be in control, I'm cool with that, too. I'm fine with whatever you want. As long as you pay and know that I absolutely do not spend the night and don't kiss on the mouth.

Ever.

*

A text message from one of my regulars comes through, a rich married dude named Greg.

Come fuck me, it reads. *I'll pay the usual.*

I'm on the eastside and he's in Santa Monica. *Roadz* says it'll take me 55 minutes to cover the 18 miles to his house. I'm the little blue arrow sitting there at the intersection of Anderson and Fourth in Boyle Heights. He's the green dot near the blue smudge with the faded gray words spelling out Pacific Ocean. Between us there's an endless grid of streets and freeways, alleys and service roads. Some are yellow in spots, others throbbing bright

red like arteries about to burst. The light turns green, and I go, zigzagging through traffic, speeding around slow-moving trucks and vans. I cut drivers off. They honk and give me the finger.

Fuck you. I'm hustling here. Gotta make the cash.

This is what I'm about.

*

His neighborhood is all wide lawns with lush green grass. Palm trees are lined up along the curbs, swaying in salt-scented air. The homes are decorated with talavera-tiled entryways and thick wooden doors with hinges that groan when they open. I park across from his two-story house. My cell buzzes as I get out of the car. Not another client this time. A text message from my father.

Call me.

Can't, I type back. *Class.*

The last time I saw my parents was at my grandfather's funeral a few months ago. Since then, I've been avoiding them, keeping myself busy, partly because that whole business of death and dying is hard to confront, and also because shit's always been tense with me and my dad. It started back in high school, right around the time he pressured me to get into sports. I tried out for the wrestling team, made it to junior varsity, but quit because the coach was an asshole and I didn't see the point of getting kneed in the balls and pinned down to a smelly mat by another dude. He was disappointed, I knew. I tried telling him that my dreams weren't his, that I didn't want to follow in his footsteps. He acted like he understood, but I could tell he was just saying that. Throw in Abuelo dying and the fact that my dad can't help me pay for college, and there you go. Shit's beyond strained.

Right now, though, I need to push all that out of my head.

Walking across the street, I try to act cool, like I belong. I'm in a pair of baggy jeans and a black tank top. Shaved head. Tattooed. In broad daylight. Anyone can see me. Here, I'm a suspicious-looking character. I rehearse in my head what I'll say if a cop sees me:

I'm lost, officer.

My car stalled, officer.

No, I'm not carrying any weapons or drugs, officer.

Yes, you can search my car, officer.

I stroll up the driveway, all slow, natural. Once inside, I'm relieved. He's in a dress shirt and tie when he answers. There's stubble along his chin and jawline. He's kept his graying hair short, buzzed close to his scalp along the sides and back. The walls of the hallway are cool to the touch. Pictures crowd the top of a side table: his daughter holding a baseball bat; his wife (Meredith or Miranda or Michaela, some white lady name like that) with her arms around an old woman wearing a big sun hat and too much jewelry; Greg crouching next to a black Labrador.

Walking past the bathroom, I hear a low, constant hiss coming from the toilet. A pair of lace curtains sway in the breeze. I smell the ocean, imagine boats bobbing along the water and try listening for the screech of seagulls drifting in the sky above. No time to get distracted by all that bullshit, though. I'm here on business and this is how it goes: You pay me first before anything. You pay or I fucking walk.

Greg knows the drill. From his wallet, he takes some bills and sets them on the nightstand next to the bed he shares with his wife. I undress and lie down, the blanket soft against my back, the pillows perfumed by the scent of dryer sheets. He unzips his slacks and pulls them down. He keeps his dress shirt and tie on. His garters' metal clasps scratch my thighs. Instantly I'm hard. That's how I work. It's automatic. Like turning the power switch to on.

He straddles me, and we go at it.

*

Nothing like a quick fuck before heading out of town for a business conference, Greg admits. I nod, pretending to be interested.

"You should come with me," he says, putting his briefs and pants back on. "A lot of horny businessmen away from their wives. You'd make a shitload of money. A hot Mexican guy like you would be popular."

"It's good." I grab my wallet and keys and head for the door.

"I'll message you when I'm back," he says.

"Yeah. Cool."

It turns them on when I act uninterested, when I make them beg for it.

Outside, I pull away from the curb just as Greg's wife rolls up to their house and parks in the driveway. From the smudged rearview mirror of my car, I watch her unload some bags, then catch a glimpse of their little girl

making a run for the front door I just passed through.

*

Back in the day, my grandfather was a badass luchador, a national celebrity in Mexico. This was in the 1970s. He fought as a tecnico under the name of Aguila Dorado. As a kid, I used to love going through boxes of his things—old clippings, posters advertising his fights, Polaroids of him standing in the middle of a crowded bar, arms extended out, muscles oiled and flexed, surrounded by women with billowy hair and too much makeup. Big-time Mexican magazines wrote articles. Their glossy pages were filled with pictures of Abuelo doing moves and flips in the ring, walking around a poor neighborhood where a handful of kids in ratty clothes and uncombed hair peered out from open windows and doorways, looking at him like he was a ghost or spirit in yellow spandex tights and a cape decked out with feathers and fake jewels. He wore his mask like a second skin, braided around the back of his skull by a series of thick laces. The gold borders outlining his eyes and mouth were thick, defined, and even though he was one of the good guys, the mask always made him look menacing and sinister to me.

In other pictures, he's in the kitchen with my grandmother Elena, who died before I was born. She sports a polyester jacket with a wide collar, her hair in a bun, fake eyelashes fuzzy as moth wings. She's holding a wooden spoon up to Abuelo's mouth, and he stands beside her in a brown and orange checkered shirt, chains hanging from his thick neck, his lucha mask over his face because, like all luchadores, he kept his identity a secret from his fans. He even starred in films. They were on VHS tapes, so my dad had to dig out the old VCR from underneath a stack of boxes in our garage. The movies were full of cheesy plots and bad acting, but I was entertained by them, had bad dreams after I watched one involving him fighting a coven of evil witches with green faces and white eyes.

Even my father doesn't know for sure why they left Mexico right before he was born and immigrated here to Los Angeles. After my grandmother died, Abuelo quit his job at the factory, signed a long-term lease for a shabby building, and started a gym on an industrial street lined with auto body shops and scrapyards. It became a place where people from all around Boyle Heights, East L.A., even some of the hardcore old school gangbangers from fucking Hazard and Ramona Gardens, came to pump iron and, of

course, watch my abuelo duke it out with bad guy rudos inside the ring on weekends during the 1980s. His flips and acrobatics were legendary, I'm told. It was like he could fly through the air. He never stopped. His feet never touched the ground, I hear.

My father was a real troublemaker back in the day, partying, ditching class, getting wasted, and when he was in high school, Abuelo introduced him to lucha as a way to keep him out of trouble. Guess it worked, because my father ended up a badass luchador himself, took the name Aguila Dorado, Jr. in honor of Abuelo. Before I was old enough to remember, my father quit the lucha gig entirely and instead found a job at the same factory where Abuelo worked. My mom told me she used to ice his injuries after big bouts. She remembers bandages soaked in rubbing alcohol, the smell of ointments and oils wafting through the house on Saturday evenings. She remembers my father's grunts, a litany of injuries she could list off the top of her head, even now: bruised ribs, torn tendons, sprained hamstrings, cracked fingers and wrists. Blood. There was always blood. He and Abuelo put their bodies through so much just to survive.

But lucha libre wasn't my thing. Don't get me wrong, I respect the tradition, but I could never see myself dressing up in spandex tights, a crazy mask over my face, doing flips and somersaults, getting my ribs cracked and nose broken, all for what? Get out of here with that bullshit. Another string of disappointments I dumped on my father. He's pretty much abandoned hope that I'll ever start training, that I'll ever become a top-notch luchador like him.

So, the family tradition ends with me.

That's just the way it is.

*

On the day my abuelo died, I found myself standing in the gym's main entrance, near the counter they used as a concession stand. A woman fed chunks of frozen bananas and strawberries into a blender. The display case where Abuelo's luchador uniform stood—draped over a mannequin and protected behind two flimsy glass doors—was to my right. The manager, Lalo, wasn't anywhere around, and time was running out. Abuelo was in the hospital, dying. All I could think of was getting his mask, taking it to him, letting him see it one last time. I used my elbow to break the glass. Some of the

shards clung to my skin and left abrasions that burned like little angry fires.

"Ay!" the woman making smoothies shouted. "What are you doing?"

But I grabbed it anyway and bolted for the door. In my car, I hauled ass out of the parking lot, flying down the freeway. At the hospital, he was small, wasted away, a tan smudge against the white sheets. Machines beeped all around him. Red numbers and green dots flashed off and on. *How did he get so tiny? What happened to his body? Where did the muscles and tendons, the meat and the bones go?*

I took the mask out of my pocket and raised it up. "Look, Abuelo. I brought you something."

His eyes opened, but they stared up, past me and my father, past the ceiling of the hospital, and into something else, something only the dying can see. After, as the orderlies wheeled his body away, I made sure to take the mask. Despite its age, despite the wear and tear my abuelo put it through during the many years he fought, it still looked good. The white fabric was clean, unblemished. The thick gold border defining the eyes, nose, and mouth was still as menacing, still as mysterious as they appeared when I first saw it as a kid.

"Make sure you return that," my father said once we were alone.

No hug from him. No tears. Just a long, drawn out sigh.

I remember thinking, *Fuck that. This here's mine. It's a part of my history. I'm holding on to it. Abuelo would want that.*

*

Right around the time we buried my grandfather, I found out I was in danger of being forced to drop out of college because I didn't have the money to cover my tuition, which wasn't a lot for some of the families of my classmates. But for me and my parents, it was a shit ton. Once the checks my dad was sending stopped arriving as frequently after his pay was cut at work, I took matters into my own hands. I spent weeks filling out job applications at the mall, at coffee shops, bookstores, anywhere. But nobody was fucking hiring.

I was bored one night. I'd had a couple of beers, smoked a joint, and was at my apartment listening to music. There was an app I started using called Papi for men looking to hook up with Latinos. I set up a profile, uploaded some pictures, and waited. Shortly afterward, I was driving to a

house in Silverlake for my first hook up with a guy offering me money for sex. His name was Scott. He was wealthy but lonely. He was thin, with pale skin and sad, droopy eyes.

"My life's too crowded right now to accommodate a partner," he said, removing his glasses and rubbing the bridge of his nose. "If I'm not in L.A., I'm in New York City or London or Paris. I need someone to call, someone for company while I'm here."

The tone of his voice was somewhere between annoyance and fatigue. I thought maybe what Scott needed was a nap, not a fuck. I was about to get up and leave when he scooted close to me, caressed my biceps, and squeezed my thighs. We smoked some weed, then talked for about another hour before he led me to his bedroom; we undressed and went at it.

He called me a pro and said I needed to consider upping my price.

"For real?" I laughed.

"I'm serious." He folded the bills and shoved them in the pocket of my shirt. "I know plenty of guys who'd pay top dollar for you."

*

Hustling for sex turned out to be just like any other job, really. It was all about cultivating the customers you had, keeping them happy, and figuring out ways to grow the business. I developed a strong clientele base that included people like Greg and Scott. These became my regulars. I decided not to host, to keep that business away from my apartment. I didn't want nosy neighbors complaining to the building manager about men stopping by at all hours. Last thing I needed was for people to think I was dealing drugs.

*

A few days after my hook up with Greg, a private message comes to my Papi inbox. White dude named Stefan. Asks if I'm down for some role-playing, says he'll pay extra, so I write back and say, *Let's do this.*

*

He wants me to pretend to be a gay hustler, so I'm standing there on the sidewalk along a dark stretch of Santa Monica Boulevard, illuminated only

by the headlights of passing cars. I'm leaning up against the wall of a building smoking cigarettes, sporting a white tank top, faded denim jeans, a pair of black boots, and a cap pulled down low, almost covering my eyes. I'm only there for a few minutes before another guy darts across the street toward me and asks to bum a smoke. Dude's buff with a square chin and a rugged look to him. Sexy, I think. Dark brown hair. Skin slightly pocked with acne scars.

"You ain't a fucking cop, are you?" He reaches out, his hand gliding over my chest and back. "You don't got a wire on you?"

"No," I assure him. "Just checking out the action."

"What fucking action?" He exhales a ribbon of smoke and shakes his head. "Been here for, like, hours, man. And nothing."

His name is Will and he says he fell on hard times when he hooked up with a guy who took him for everything six months after he moved to Hollywood to be an actor. "I'm far from home. No money. No skills or nothing. Had this dream of becoming the next Brad Pitt or whatever. Then I meet this guy who claims to be a talent agent. Has me pay him for headshots and acting classes up front, then leaves, and I never hear from the asshole again. Fucking cliché, man! So typical."

He puts his cigarette in his mouth, balls both hands into fists, and stretches his arms out. There are letters tattooed across each knuckle and when he pushes them together, they spell cash only. "You won't believe how many of these fuckers think they can write you a check or pay you with an iPhone or a car stereo. I can't eat CDs. There are some real perverts out here."

There was this one man, a nerd with glasses and bad breath who took him to a shitty motel. The guy had a buddy who wanted to join. A while later, this second guy showed up. He was blind.

"He fucking brought his seeing-eye dog with him, man," Will shouts as a semi roars by, flicking his cigarette into the gutter. "And there I am getting gangbanged by a nerdy man with buck teeth and clammy hands and a blind man with a seeing-eye dog who just sits in the corner, looking up at me, wet nose and everything."

A few minutes later, a car cruises up and parks by the curb. The window rolls down, and I recognize the dude Stefan from his Papi profile. He waves me over, but Will moves fast, approaches Stefan's car. He leans his head inside, and they talk.

A few seconds later, he turns to me and shouts, "He wants your ass."

Moving toward the car, we pass one another, and Will rams his shoulder into mine, nearly knocking me down.

"Watch it, bro," I say.

"Been out here all fucking night," he says. "All night." Then he storms off toward the intersection, punching the air around him with those alphabet fists.

Stefan holds a wad of cash. "I've got a room down the street. Get that ass in here."

I follow his orders, take the cash, and shove it in my pocket.

*

The hotel has banged up furniture and curtains dotted with cigarette burns. He uses bright red and green bungee cords to tie my arms and legs to the bedposts. From an oversized gym bag, the same color as my father's, he pulls out whips, paddles, nipple clamps, lube, giant rubber dildos, and a fresh bottle of poppers. He unscrews the cap and forces me to inhale. My head gets light, my temples pulse, and my dick swells up, fat and plump and purple.

When we finish, Stefan dresses, grabs his keys and wallet, shoves everything back inside the gym bag, and leaves without saying anything. I stumble into the motel bathroom and rinse my mouth out with water from the sink, the taste of him—salty and pungent—still on my tongue. Outside, at the edge of the parking lot, I smoke a cigarette. On the sidewalk a few feet away, two hustlers stand near the bus stop. One wears a tank top decorated with green and white beads that glimmer from the neon lights of the donut shop on the corner. The other sports a pair of red spandex shorts, heavy boots, and a cotton hoodie zipped down, exposing his smooth, tan chest. Blue face masks cover their mouths and noses, the pleats of cloth stretching up and out with each breath they take. As I pass, the one in the sparkly tank top checks me out and says in a muffled voice, "Where you headed, papi?"

But I don't answer; I'm too deep into my own thoughts, too far gone, my head still foggy from the poppers. Tonight, the air's bone dry and dusty from the Santa Ana winds. The power lines lacing through the streets buzz and crack. There's the aroma of burning embers. It settles into my skin,

coats the palm trees along Santa Monica. Everything around me is all lit up, on the verge of catching fire. I wonder how it'll all change us, who we'll become once this burning finally stops.

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Step on a Crack

Amy Wallen

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_____

My biggest fear my whole life was that my mom would die. If she got a cold and lay down on the sofa for a nap, I'd check every few minutes to see if she was breathing. Once, when we'd spent the day at the beach and she had fallen into a deep sleep under the hot sun, the tide came sliding under her lithe little body, tugging her out to sea inches at a time. The ebb and flow made her look dead. Her mouth hung open, her body swished and swayed in the wet sand.

I stood in the sand over her while two thoughts battled in my head: What if I try to wake her and she really is dead? And: If she *is* alive and I don't wake her, will she be swept away? Which would be worse for me to live with? My mom was my everything. Was I her everything, too? I was always afraid to ask because what would I do if I found out I wasn't?

Life with my mother was one of awe and fear. I wrote a memoir about this awe and fear.

Then she died.

She died eleven months to the day after my memoir was published. As it did that day on the beach when I watched her being pulled out to sea, something tugs at my conscience. Would she still be alive if I had never written my story?

My memoir students often ask if they should write their story while others are still alive. In the past, I've always responded with what my mentors said to me: "We are all entitled to our perspective. Let others write their own story if they disagree with yours." But finding myself in this crisis of con-

science, I've started to regret my pat answer.

Every story has an antagonist, and my mom could be called the antagonist in my memoir. She was also my hero. I wanted nothing more than to be like her, to be near her, to have her acknowledge that I was the daughter she always loved and wanted. This was the Voice of Innocence.

In my memoir, Mom's negligence compounded my fear that she would one day be gone for good. But as a girl, I never blamed her. When I was seven and my parents left me in the vestibule of a pub in London while they went in for a drink with friends, I waited. When they returned, tipsy and jovial, and I told my mom I'd been "ascared," she corrected my vocabulary. It didn't matter to me that she had made me wait—she had returned happy. If my mom was happy, I was happy. I assumed it was my job to make her happy—a Sisyphean task.

*

Of course, there were books before my memoir. The very first book I ever wrote was a picture book of all the places we had lived. My second was a spiral notebook with Snoopy on the cover that I filled with short stories and gave my brother for Christmas when I was twelve. When I first started writing seriously, my mom was writing, too. I don't know who started first. Could have been she was writing and I wanted to be like her. Or, it could have been the other way around.

My mom began writing a book while I was taking my first creative writing class. She wanted me to be her editor. She would send me packets of work each week and I would critique them. Her story was about a little girl who was cute and sweet and lived in Nigeria, Peru, and Bolivia—sort of a Shirley Temple lives my life. My critiques suggested she was making the little girl's life too perfect.

"Too much treacle," I told Mom. After a few back and forths, I began to realize my mom was just engaging me, not really revising from my editorial advice.

In my frustration, I told her I thought she was done. She agreed. She said she was going to publish it. By this point, I already knew publishing wasn't that quick and easy.

When she told people about her book, she said, "I'm writing Amy's life story."

I corrected her: "You're writing *your* version of my life story."

She rolled her eyes and said, "You edited it. If you didn't agree with what it said, you should have said something."

This may have been our first bone of contention. The second was when she paid what we called back then a "vanity press" to publish it. You can still order her book on Amazon.

Still, when my first novel was published by a New York publishing house, my mother was beyond happy and proud. She didn't realize I had a character in the novel I had modeled on her. The character was a narcissist and when her daughter-in-law became famous, she said, "Now I'm a star-in-law."

My mom was certain my novel would be a blockbuster. When I gave her a copy, she told me, "Now I'm a bestseller-by-proxy."

Yep, I thought, I drew that character authentically.

My book tour took me to the town in Texas where my parents lived. My mom talked the bookstore into letting her set up a card table so she could sign her books while I signed mine. I still don't know what to think or feel about that. Horror? Pity? Anger? Annoyance? I think the last is as far as I went. I was used to her.

*

My memoir, like my mother's book, is also about a little girl who lived in Nigeria, Peru, and Bolivia. I didn't expect my mom to read it. She was 85 and had declared herself blind about two years before. She had always been an avid reader, so my assumption was foolish, but I also told myself that I had written nothing untruthful and nothing bad about her—I had made it clear she was doing the best she could under the circumstances. In the meantime, she ordered it, downloaded it on her Kindle, blew up the type to 24 point, and told me she couldn't wait to read it.

A week later, the first phone call came. She told me how much I got all the details right. How everything about Nigeria was so spot on. How did I remember all of that so well? I swooned with pride.

"I did love those salty dogs," she said, smacking her lips. "Grapefruit and vodka." I smiled, remembering the scene I'd written in which she's drinking in the bathroom while putting on her makeup before a party.

A few more days went by and she called again. Her tone had changed.

"Did you really think I was so mean? I had malaria. I thought I was going to

die." That's what the book was about, I told her, how I was so afraid. How, when she had one perfectly manicured foot in the grave, I feared I would end up all alone in a faraway land. My much older brother and sister had been sent to boarding school in Switzerland and my dad worked on the Niger Delta most of the time. At home, it was just me and my mom on what I thought was her deathbed.

"It wasn't *my* fault you were alone," she said. "Your dad went to the bush despite my telling him not to."

"I don't blame you, Mom. I am just explaining *my* version of the story. It's how I remember feeling. I was afraid to be without any family at seven years old in Nigeria." I wanted to say "ascared."

The subsequent phone calls were pretty much the same: I had it all wrong. My memory was distorted. I couldn't possibly remember her that way. Eventually, I just responded, "Get to the end. It has a happy ending."

From my perspective, she was the one with the distorted memory because her adult life was so rich with travel and adventures. She had maids and shopped and later had a career and three children who were relatively sane. Her husband was in love with her.

Mom was angry, and a part of me feels she had every right to be. On the other hand, I wrote about her as I remembered her when I was a child—beautiful, with great taste and sophistication, throwing fabulous parties, decorating stylish houses, and being a talented piccolo player. She left me outside pubs, but she taught me how to make myself happy by being resilient and independent.

At one point, she called to tell me that her best friend had read the book and explained to her what I'd intended.

"I know that you were afraid I didn't love you." Mom spoke matter-of-factly. "I want you to know that I love you, that I have always loved you, and I always will love you." She spoke in a list. I knew she loved me, on her terms. She always said, "I love you," when we said goodbye on any phone call or when we said good night during my visits. She was the best mother she could be.

"I will always be there," she said on the phone, as though this was a given. "In fact," she said, with a hint of sarcasm, "I will haunt you for the rest of your life."

I laughed, a little "ascared."

*

I was hosting a dinner party when my mother's care manager called. Calmly and succinctly, she told me that my mother had choked, that she had received the Heimlich to no avail, that the EMTs had arrived and had done a mouth sweep. They found nothing. Now they needed to know if they should continue resuscitating.

"They need to know," she said. "She has had no heartbeat for four minutes. Do you want them to continue?"

This is what I know about my mother: she never wanted to be left alive on machines; she never wanted tubes and a long drawn out hospital stay. She talked about this often and had made it clear that she did not want to be resuscitated if it meant she wouldn't really be living but only breathing. When she fell and broke her hip, she wouldn't leave the house once she was ambulatory again until the bruises on her face had healed.

"They need to know," the care manager repeated. I had left my guests and wandered into the bedroom. I stared out the window at the street lights. "They can't get a pulse," she continued.

It felt exactly like the moment when Mom was lying on the beach and the ocean was trying to take her. The ebb and the flow, is she alive or is she dead?

"Should they continue to resuscitate?"

"No," I said. Then I heard my father, in the background, screaming, "Don't stop! Keep going!"

"Wait!" I said into the phone. "What happens if they take the next steps to resuscitate her? Is it painful? Is it unlikely they will be successful? What will happen?" I couldn't let her go. I knew they were waiting. I knew every second counted. But I couldn't give the say-so just like that.

"They will take her to the hospital and break open her rib cage to revive her," the care manager said. "But she has been with no pulse for over four minutes. Yes, it's painful. It's a very long recovery, *if* she survives." She was an RN and was trained for this. I was not.

Or maybe I was.

"OK," I said, "they can stop."

No matter how I look at it, I can't help but think I killed my mother. But that phone call is not the murder weapon. No, it is my memoir. Would she have started drinking more if I hadn't published my story? Would she have

stayed with just a glass of wine at dinner instead of four, getting blotto every night?

*

Mom had always been a heavy drinker. During one of my visits home, she placed a cookie sheet of raisins on the kitchen counter, smothered them in gin, then forbade me to eat any because they were for her arthritis. Her cleverness and my denial meant I was in my thirties before her tricks stopped fooling me.

She had gotten so bad at one point that half-gallon bottles of vodka overflowed in the large trash cans in the garage, waiting for the recycling truck every two weeks. My husband has many anecdotes of my drunken mom that he likes to recount. There was the morning that she asked him, "When you're done with the breakfast dishes, will you pour me another scotch?" Or, the Thanksgiving when none of us would fix her another drink, so she had the four-year-old retrieve the bottle of Tito's vodka.

A couple of years ago, my sister had a big talk with Mom and she cut way back. As in: She started to drink white wine instead. She might get a little tipsy, but she wasn't the sloshy drunk she had been. She was doing pretty well with cutting back, at least until my memoir came out.

After that, she became angry and bitter. More acerbic than she'd been in a long time. She was meaner to my dad than ever. The night she died, she told him she "despised" him. She could sting like a wasp and walk away as if she hadn't done anything you hadn't deserved.

"Choking" is the cause of death on the death certificate. But the EMTs found no evidence of blockage. Nonetheless, they said, her lungs were full to the point they could not intubate.

On top of the drinking, Mom had a chronic lung infection. Heavy dosing of antibiotics had seemed to keep it at bay. She was feeling better, and the blood clots in her lungs had shrunk. But alcohol counteracts antibiotics and weakens your immune system. Her lung infection started getting worse. The caregivers pleaded with her to quit drinking. They asked my siblings and me to intervene. My mom sent us a letter saying she would not quit drinking because it was the only thing in her life that made her happy.

It could be assumed her antibiotics quit working, the blood clots burst, and this had caused the hands in the air, the gasping, and the passing out,

all of which my father witnessed.

*

After Mom died, my siblings and I cleaned out her bedroom. I opened her Kindle and found my memoir in her library. Of course, the first place I looked was the line that showed how far along she was: 71%.

She never got to the happy ending.

I found an email she had written the week before she died that read, "I can't believe Amy would do this to me. I have had the most miserable life."

I can't know what my mother's childhood was really like, but from her stories over the years, I gleaned that she had a father who was verbally and physically abusive, a "rummy" for a mother, and seven brothers and sisters who ran around completely unsupervised on the family farm. My mom milked cows before school and was also the May Fete Queen, complete with tiara and train.

Sometimes she would imply "horrible things" happened. She never said what they were, not in any explicit way. She'd just say, "You don't know what I have had to go through." When I was a kid and she'd say this, I would envision her locked in the basement (they didn't have a basement) and made to eat nails. Or, I'd imagine some sort of *Silence of the Lambs* trauma from slaughtering pigs or ringing the necks of chickens. I couldn't fathom what it was that she'd had to "go through." What had she endured that was too horrific to say out loud or write about?

She is dead now, and I can write freely about her life, I suppose. On her computer was a twelve-page, single-spaced "story" she had left for me. It was dated a month before and titled "The Truth." She wrote in third person about a character called "Dumb Girl," who very much resembled Mom except for the "Dumb" moniker. Nothing makes me sadder than to think this story was her truth. It opened with a scene in which a fellow not unlike my father ("Sly Guy") didn't compliment her on her wedding trousseau, and ended with her retirement to Texas with Sly Guy after 65 years of marriage. She couldn't leave him because she needed the health insurance. No drama, just 65 years of disillusionment. Others disappointing her.

*

Should I have waited to write my version of my life until she died?

That seems the most logical response—to wait until someone dies before writing about them. But she wrote my story from her perspective. I didn't write my memoir out of revenge, or at least that's not how it feels. It feels more like I wrote it out of freedom—she'd written about me, why shouldn't I write about her? The difference is that she wrote *her* version of *my* life. I wrote *my* version of *my* life.

My perspective of her as an unhappy mother was not what she had wanted me, much less the world, to see. I wanted her to be happy, and she wanted me to see her that way.

My memoir had a happy ending, which my mother never read: she loved me the only way she knew how and I was glad she was my mother, for without her, or maybe because of her, I would have never learned to be happy on my own.

Still, no matter how I look at it, my mother died because of me. Being afraid she would die is one thing; being responsible in some way, no matter how small or large, is another. Even that day on the beach, when she was probably passed out drunk, what if I hadn't been hovering over her? Did I save her life then? Did I keep watch my whole life? And when I quit keeping watch, did exactly what I had feared actually happen?

When I wrote my memoir, I needed to write that particular story. If I had waited, the memories would have been tainted with distance. I would not have uncovered what my family meant to me at *that* time of writing—just as my mom needed to write the story of a little girl who was cute and sweet and never "ascared." And, I am sad to say, she needed to write "Dumb Girl." We both wrote our versions in the space and time the stories came to us.

My memoir is my story. It's not how my mother would tell it, and not how my brother or sister would tell it. It is not about my mother. It's about *me*. All I know for sure is that I wrote about what happened exactly as I remembered it at the time my pen drew ink on the page. Even if I tried to write that memoir now after she's dead, I'd still be telling how unhappy she was. Just as I've done here. Just as she has always done as well.

My mother *will* haunt me for the rest of my life—and this makes me happy because she will always be there for me. But it wasn't my memoir that killed her. It was her truth that did.

FICTION

Honey and Ashes

Jim Lewis

This, too, is going to happen. A woman will stand at a podium on the stage of a theater. She'll be a West African woman, and the theater will be on the campus of a university, a university in New York City. Most of the people in the audience will be students, but some of them will be professors and support staff, and some will be people from the community, most of whom have never been on the campus before, and who have come on this occasion—a clear fall night—to see the woman speak.

The theater is going to be crowded, all the seats filled: there will be a dozen people standing in the back, and a few more sitting in the aisles with their coats and bags tucked around their legs. An usher will try to move the people in the aisles, but as soon as he succeeds in doing so, others will take their place, and in time he'll simply give up, turning to the back of the theater with an irritated shrug and an expression on his face that says, What can I do? But there will be no one who cares enough either to chide him or excuse him.

There are going to be camera crews along the side walls: two on the right side and one on the left, and they'll have bright lights set up, which will make the atmosphere slightly tense, as it often is when everything is easily visible. A man in a heavy black V-neck sweater is going to turn to his companion, a woman in a slate grey coat, and say, Someone should tell them to turn those off. He'll pause and start to get to his feet—but just then a young woman will walk out from the wings and take her place at the podium, so he'll sit down again. The audience will quickly hush, and the woman

at the podium will look out over the people gathered there, and take a few breaths.

She'll be dressed in a conservative charcoal-colored suit and black shoes, and wearing a pair of small silver earrings, an outfit that will be meant to make her look formal, dignified, and perhaps more mature, though in fact it'll make her look even younger than she is—so much so that some people in the audience will assume she's not the speaker at all, not the main speaker anyway, but a student who's been tasked with introducing her—perhaps because they're from the same country, for when the woman begins to speak, she'll have an accent, slight and charming, but unmistakable, especially when she pronounces less common words, like *amnesia*, which she'll render with four distinct syllables, or words with prominent r's—*treason*, for example, or *resources*, or *revival*. And soon the audience will realize that she's the one they came to see.

Her name will be Matilda, or something like that—a Western name, but an old-fashioned one: a church name, slightly ungainly, but also elegant, dignified, even comforting. She'll be a Christian woman, and she'll say so, with a plainness that seems to prove it: I am a Christian woman. My mother was a Christian, and so too was my father. And then she'll tell them about her country, the country where she was born and where she continues to live, even though she could live elsewhere if she wanted. She'll talk about the landscape, the reddish color of the dirt, and the rains, and about the way the air smells when the rain has passed. She'll talk about her father's sign-painting shop, and how she used to sit there watching him work. She'll talk about her sister, who was several years older than she was; how strong the woman was, even through all her losses; how little she spoke but how much she knew; and how many people attended her funeral, where they sang the old songs of grief.

She'll talk for a little while about punishment, and then she'll talk about forgiveness, and about mercy, even for those who haven't asked for forgiveness. The audience, which will be mixed—some black, some brown, some white; some Christian, some not—will listen carefully, even with the distraction of the television cameras and the lights. They'll sit, motionless and attentive, while she describes, with a slight smile, the difference between the tears one cries when one remembers, and the tears one cries at the pain of something present and immediate. She'll say a few words about the size and shape of the world, how round it is, and its three colors: blue, green, and

brown, just like the eyes of the people who live upon it. She'll talk about having learned a few things along the days, specifically, about what people must have, regardless of what else they might be blessed with, like wealth, or soul-sweetness, or very good luck. They need the words, for example, all the words to a few valuable songs, like the old songs of grief; a place to go where they can be alone, and a place to go where they're never alone; someone to admire, someone they know personally and can visit when they want to. She'll mention a saying that she once heard from a man that she herself admired: that the words Thank you are among the first that a child learns, and they should be the last words all men and women say, when they close their eyes and their spirits are ready to rise, at last, away from this good grim world. And then she'll thank the audience for coming out to see her, and for listening to the things she has to say.

When she's finished, the applause will be long and very loud, and afterwards people are going to linger in the lobby, talking to each other, even after the house lights have come up, the television crews have packed their things and left, and the university employee charged with locking up has taken to making shooing gestures. Extraordinary, that such a young woman, from such a poor place, could have achieved so much. I only wish we had more leaders like that in our country.—Remarks like that, not really conversations, and spoken with a certain dazedness, almost an exhaustion. Then there's going to be a brief scuffle by the door, when one man accidentally steps on the back of another man's shoe.

*

Later that evening there will be a dinner, in a restaurant just off campus that's been rented out for the night. Matilda will be the guest of honor, though any stranger who might happen to peer through the window would find it impossible to tell that she is. There will be four identical round tables, with six seats at each table, and one long rectangular table with ten seats. The guests will arrive all at once—or not all at once, exactly, but within a few minutes of each other, having walked from the auditorium in groups of three and four, chatting with each other pleasantly, and even laughing, for however important the speech was, now was the time to celebrate having heard it. Matilda will arrive with a middle-aged man, well-dressed but startlingly ugly, with pockmarked skin and protruding eyes, and what's more,

walking with a slight limp, the result of a bout of polio he suffered as a child—a well-known poet from her own country, though long since exiled and writing in English. To an observer, they'll look as if they're bound to each other by their shared origin, though the truth will be more complicated and subtle than that: their conversation will be an elaborate and slightly artificial exchange, consisting largely of gestures, on his part of deference to her power, and on her part of deference to his wisdom. He'll call her by a name that means *dearest* (or *most valuable*, or *most unusual*) *one*, for example, and she'll call him by a name that means: *one of the men for whom I feel almost the way I feel for my father*. Still, their respect for each other, touched though it is with real warmth and a certain pride, will be tempered by the fact that the older man is not a Christian, and in fact has made the imposition of Christianity in his native country one of the themes he visits and revisits in his work; and while neither of them will be offended by such a disagreement, each will assume that the other one is, and the result will be a slight awkwardness between them, manifested in exaggerated courtesies.

There's going to be a bustle at the door to the restaurant, with the maitre d' checking names against a list, people stopping dazedly to gaze around the room while others pile up in the glass vestibule behind them, waiters coming forward with trays of hors d'oeuvres, and two or perhaps three very large men, security agents of some sort, hired by the university against Matilda's wishes, who will stand motionless just inside the door, causing the flow of people around them to become more chaotic, the way water in a stream roils around boulders. The poet will disappear without saying goodbye, and a hand will gently touch Matilda's back, a voice will murmur in her ear, and she'll be guided through the room to the rectangular table, where she'll be seated with a city councilman on one side, and a television personality on the other side; and there will be an American diplomat, a very rich man and his wife, and then, all the way around at the other side of the table, a young man, a few years younger than herself, black as a crow, and with long, locked hair, who will seem, though she won't be able to say why, to have more power than all of them, and certainly more self-possession: more spirit—much self, as the expression has it in her language. Why? It'll be something about the way he's dressed, which is more casual than anyone else in the restaurant, but with a certain attention to detail: a black and grey silk scarf, a well-fitting black jumper unzipped to his sternum. And

the way he carries himself, she'll think, some aspect of his posture that she can't quite describe, either because it's too dark in the room, or she's too distracted, or because she doesn't know enough about the way young people behave here. Then she'll realize that he's watching her stare at him, and she'll turn, embarrassed, and give her attention to the man at her side.

The television personality sitting at her right is going to be a large man, well over six feet tall and broad. She will have been on his show that afternoon. It won't have been her first time on television, but it will have been her first time doing so in this country, and she'll have been vexed by the way they stopped, every few minutes, for a commercial. And in fact even now, at dinner, he'll have the same sort of attention span, as if the rhythms of his television show were a direct reflection of the rhythms of his thought. —You know, you mean so much to so many people, he'll say to her. I've never seen the people who work in my office so excited to meet a guest. Honestly. Tomorrow I'm going to go in and tell them that I was sitting right next to you at dinner, and they're going to want to know everything you said and did.

Matilda is going to be taken aback by this, but she'll recover quickly enough to make fun of her own alarm, widening her eyes and raising her eyebrows, smiling and moving backwards in her seat a little bit, with her hands gripping the edge of the table as if she was on a roller coaster. The television personality will chuckle and say, Don't worry. I'm not going to tell on you. In my profession, you don't last long if you're the kind of man who gossips. He'll lean in to speak to her: They say things about me, too, you know. The newspapers. They pay people—he'll point—like that waiter, for example, to be informants, to provide information.

Matilda is going to look at the waiter. Him? she'll say, in a tone of voice somewhere between curiosity and shock, and unsure whether she's understood.

The television personality will say, Not him, necessarily. You know what I mean, he'll say, and Matilda will nod distractedly. It will have grown very loud in the restaurant, with everyone talking and the waiters moving about, and chairs being shifted slightly so that someone can speak more directly to someone else; and she'll be trying to smile at everyone who smiles at her, but she'll be thinking about her two young boys, whom she'd left at home, and whom she misses terribly. The television personality will pat her hand and say, That's all right, never mind. I'm just very pleased to spend some time with you.

There's going to be a glass of wine to the right of her table setting, but she won't drink from it. Where she's from, a woman tastes wine only in church, and while part of what she'll have spoken about that very evening will have been the problems—the difficulties—the issues—besetting the culture that she comes from, she is after all a woman from just that place, and its habits are not so easily left behind; and in fact, this is one phenomenon that will always disconcert her, when she travels to cities like this, the alcohol with a meal, the assumption that she wants to have alcohol, and more broadly, that everyone wants to be intoxicated, whenever it might be possible.

She'll remember an occasion in London some years previously, when someone she needed to speak to, someone she was soliciting, at last relented and agreed to meet with her the following afternoon, in a bar near her hotel. When she arrived, she found a dark, discreet room, with tablecloths and a bartender in a grey vest; and while it was pleasant enough, no men at the bar with machetes sheathed under the waistband of their pants, no party girls tucking cash between their pressed-together breasts, still she'd felt uncomfortable there, the more so when the waiter asked her what she was having. She'd needed to search for the right words, a response that wouldn't be prudish or impolite; and she'd worried that she was resisting some fundamental gesture of hospitality, like a piece of bread, or a bit of colored cloth—the kind of thing which, in other parts of the world, would be an untenable breach of manners to refuse. But in the intervening years, she will have discovered that it was easiest to allow her glass to be filled, and then simply to ignore it, as she'll do that night.

Across the table, just now arriving, there's going to be a grey-haired woman, a professor from the university, and her husband, once a dean at the same institution and now retired, both of them prominent figures, the wife, perhaps, more so than the husband. Matilda will smile at them and wave, happy and in fact a little bit relieved to see them, because it's the professor who will have made it possible for her to come here, who sought her out, contacted her, issued the invitation, arranged her airplane flight and her stay in one of the university's guest rooms, set up her speaking engagement, composed the guest list for this dinner, and so on. And yet the weekend has been so busy that Matilda won't have had the time to meet with her privately, to get to know her and to thank her for this opportunity.

They will be very old, the professor and her husband: where Matilda is from, men and women that old will be very scarce, a thing to look upon

with wonder and respect; but here in this city, there will be a great many old people, the sidewalks will be full of them. Still, these two will be special, as if age were its own crown; it'll be evident from their bearing, in how much they give out and how much they hold back. It will show in the unhurried way they take their seats, the professor waiting patiently while her husband, who's noticeably stiff and perhaps even a little bit unsure of where he is, slowly lowers himself into his chair. When he's settled, the woman will take her own seat, and only then will she look across the table, and say with great warmth, Matilda! How are you holding up? And when Matilda indicates that all is well, she'll turn and whisper something to her husband, and he'll nod and then sit back in his chair and observe the scene before him, as old people do: silent, expressionless, his eyes peering out hawk-like from behind his large, hooked nose, his hands folded on the tabletop.

*

Afterwards, Matilda, the professor, and her husband will linger on the sidewalk outside the restaurant, saying goodbye to their guests, with thanks and promises, compliments, more and more handshakes and kisses, until at last they'll look around and discover that they're alone, and they'll sigh and collect themselves. Hm! the dean will say, but when Matilda turns her attention to him, she'll find that he's looking across the street at nothing in particular. Come, the professor will say to her, we'll walk you back to your room.

There will be scholars on Broadway, and mothers with all of their belongings in plastic bags, Chinese men on bicycles, and scaffolding everywhere, as if the entire city ended at the first floor, above which there was only a stage set. Outside a subway station, a young black man—just a boy, really—will be sitting on a small stool, drumming loudly on a little jazz kit, and the professor will stop to watch, nod approvingly, and drop a few dollars in the cardboard box at the drummer's feet. They'll pass through a narrow iron gate onto a grand, quiet campus of old stone and brick buildings topped with green copper roofs, quite a different landscape than the one they just left; for one thing, the smells of the street, of food and refuse, and aging concrete, will have disappeared—but there'll be the same spring mist overhead, charged with a million particles of discarded light.

Matilda will be struck by the evidence of riches around her and how sud-

denly it appeared, the quiet, the lovely lampposts and architecture, the students in their expensive clothes, or in tattered clothes worn as wealthy people wear them; and the three of them will slow, not to take in their surroundings, though Matilda will use the opportunity to do so, but because the dean will have grown tired and will have conveyed as much to his wife, perhaps by clutching her arm a little more tightly, or by allowing his shoes to scrape the ground a little more audibly, or by one of the many unspoken signals that couples who have been together for a long time send to each other.

Now moving quite slowly, they're going to make their way past a monumental building, its windows shining from within. —That's the library, the professor will say.

Ah, yes, I see, Matilda will say. And then, —Is it open always?

Yes, the professor will explain, stopping. Twenty-four hours a day, while classes are in session.

Matilda will watch through the windows as a young man strolls swiftly down one of the inside corridors, pauses to say something flirtatious to a girl about his age, and then emerges, just a few seconds later, from the front door of the library, slowing as he nears them and glancing for a long moment at Matilda's face, before his pace quickens again and he passes down the long pathway to the north end of the campus. Matilda will turn to the professor. He knew who you were, the professor will say.

No... Matilda will reply, not out of modesty but in genuine disbelief.

Yes, he did, the professor will say.

Matilda will laugh brightly, and then change the subject, as she often does; if there is one thing she will have learned, over the years, it's how to change the subject without others noticing. Have you been here a long time? she'll ask.

Yes, a very long time, the professor will say. Forever, almost all my life. And my husband has been here even longer than I have. In fact, I was once his student. —This was quite some time ago, you know, back when he was teaching. He was young then, and I was even younger. The professor will touch Matilda's arm. —You should have seen him, she'll continue. He was so handsome, and he dressed so elegantly: like a gigolo, he was.

I'm sorry? Matilda will say, tilting her head. A...

Oh, the professor will say, a man who hires himself out to women for sex. —And Matilda, slightly shocked, will look over at the professor's husband

to see if he minds the imputation, and find nothing at all in his expression to suggest that he does. Instead, he'll stop and speak to Matilda for the first time. Everybody was in love with her! he'll say. But I got her! Then he'll smile, with large yellow teeth, a smile so broad and ferocious that for a moment he'll look like a madman, and he'll nod once emphatically.

Yes, the professor will say warmly. You certainly did. And her husband will nod once more, and then they'll start walking again.

You had many suitors, Matilda will say.

I had my share, the professor will say, as if her share was a large one, and no more needed to be said about that. She'll point. —This is the main administration building.

Matilda will look up and see the wide marble stairs, the heavy colonnade, and she'll wonder who paid for such a magnificent building, and who designed it, and who quarried the marble, and who lifted it into place: how many thousands of men, and where they all lived—were there camps here, where the students now walk?—and who cooked for them when they came home at night.

What are you thinking? the professor will ask.

Oh, nothing, I was just looking, Matilda will say. And then: This campus, this entire city, it's all so... —The word will escape her. ....Venerable?

The professor will nod, and then pause, waiting for Matilda to say more. The professor's husband, too, will be looking at her, his eyes so clear that Matilda will feel like she's looking through them, straight into the spark that animates him. Both of them will seem to be smiling, although neither of them actually will be; and Matilda is going to smile herself in phantom empathy. No, she'll say, I don't think that's the exact word. Ancient. Aboriginal. Like a civilization that's been lost for thousands of years, and then reappears, yes? With its magnificent buildings appearing out of the mist, and all the people with their customs and rites, bent to their business.

The professor will nod and say, The New World. It's always been here.

*

Matilda won't think of this moment for many years, not until two more wars have passed in her country, and one season of very heavy rain, and one where there was no rain at all. Some diseases will have been cured, and a few new diseases will have sprung up to take their place. She'll have gone

from being universally admired to being almost as universally despised, and then back to being treasured again; and then almost forgotten, until a man who had been in love with her many years earlier wrote a song about her called Honey and Ashes, with a sweet and mournful melody and the words *when we were young, and time was time for kissing*, made all the more piercing because he recorded it himself. People heard the song and remembered her as he remembered her. By then, her husband will be long since gone, but she'll have many people whom she considers part of her family, and indeed, one of her own sons will be a professor himself. When she does think of that night in New York, she's going to remember it very well: the scent in the air, the luxury of the campus, the pride of the dean and the affection of the professor. She'll be sitting in a comfortable wooden chair, in the dooryard of her nephew's house, when it'll come back to her, all at once, in part because she's grown old and she's reflecting on her past, but mostly because she's been thinking this: They say the butterfly evolved so that its wings would resemble the petals of flowers; but what if it's the flowers that evolved to look like the butterfly's wings?

POETRY

“Always Have a Story,” “Field Notes,” “High Drama,” and “Chinatown Romeo”

Michael Chang

ALWAYS HAVE A STORY

BAIT LIKE THE BUS
STAGED BUT I DON’T CARE
EXALT IN THEIR BODIES
WORTHLESS BOYS
DECORATE YOUR PLAIN
WHINNYING THROAT EXPLOSION
WILLIWAW OF CUM
LOAD IN DIAL-UP
CASTING COUCH BATED BREATH
POISON BY MAKE-UP
QUEST TO LOOK WHITE
WAIT FOR IT
THERE ARE MANY PEOPLE AT VERSAILLES TODAY
BUT NO PLUMBING
CAN YOU IMAGINE THE SMELL
BLOND PATROCLUS SWEAT LIKE HONEY

DOES THAT MAKE ME VENUS BEAUTIFUL
POUR GOLD KNOCK SCALES OFF BALANCE
CREATIVE HOLLYWOOD ACCOUNTING
I DON'T KNOW HER ACHILLES
THE RESEMBLANCE IS UNCANNY LOUIS MAYER
TITANS OF INDUSTRY MAKE AMUSING PETS
GREAT PHYSIQUE LAZY EYE
DISMISSED AS TRADE
EUREKA BETTA PUT SOME RESPEK ON IT
PLUM AS PEACH
YOU TASTE SO LEMONY
MASTURBATED BY
THE LONG ARM
OF COINCIDENCE
THEY TELL ME
NO TRANS FATS

FIELD NOTES ON THE PRODIGAL SON

she knows before i do that i want you

they see us out at dinner, dressed in our finery

i'm in a leather jacket from charivari

i don't remember what you're wearing, it's the 80s

* * *

we order duck confit & baked alaska

not knowing what to expect

they say *what a pretty family*

too bad they are chinks

HIGH DRAMA PANDA FURY

For Blake

A fougère is a scent designed to mimic how a fern smells
Easy, obvious, straightforward enough, except ferns don't really have smells
So a fougère is someone's IDEA of what a fern OUGHT to smell like
. . . nobody dies in this poem b/c dying is not cute

Not all boys are worth chasing
I want to be ambitious yet cowardly
Yes it is better to lie in wait
You are cordially invited to cuddle with me, panting heroically:

Yes I want to have nice legs
I want to be tired after practice
I want to have muscles shapely & intimidating
I want to arouse envy

I want to taste artificially flavored blueberry
I want to have never seen Jurassic Park
I want to be unburdened by the knowledge of Jeff Goldblum as sex symbol
I want to be relieved that Chris Pratt is str8

I want to be from Long Island
I want to brunch with Her Majesty's Most Loyal Opposition
I want to catfish the Lieutenant Governor of California
I want to discuss the lady ghostbusters with my lady lawyer

I want to write a poem abt a horse
I want to know where to hide a body
I want to be lost at sea
I want to be one with the otters

I want to speak one language
I want to be Alan Cumming's bathrobe
I want to catch the burglar in the act
I want to kiss him mid-tantrum

Yes I want to call in a favor with the moon
Hey
You there
Have you learned nothing

CHINATOWN ROMEO

I observe John taking a shit

(it stinks really bad)

I don't tell anyone what I witness

(it reeks so bad)

He isn't a vegetarian

—do you think he's ashamed?

Is that why he's trolling the

corridors, catching glimpses of

transitory boys in towels?

Shuffling boys with no souls,

the outlines of their bulges fastidious

Floppy cocks in
various guises,

pricks a nourishing sight

One so beautiful John drops his laptop

—howling

Scattering boys like cockroaches

despoiled & accidentally awake

ESSAYS/NONFICTION

This Story Will Change

Elizabeth Crane

Forever

Once upon 2004, a woman and a man were married in a backyard ceremony on a glorious September Saturday on the west side of Chicago, handmade streamers in the trees, friends and family present to bear witness. They were happy and in love and people knew they were happy and in love. If anyone thought, Oh this is a terrible idea, they forever held their peace. Many of them spoke as the spirit moved them to share why they celebrated this love, and the celebration seemed genuine, and the couple was like, these people all get it, cool, we knew it, this marriage really is a good idea. But who knows, maybe someone did hold their peace. Maybe they could ask. They would have to ask everyone. They've lost touch with some of them. Sometimes on purpose. Which is not a thing you want to have to say about people who were at your wedding. Or in it. Especially if one of them was the bride or the groom. What if someone held their peace and then they died? What if they got in touch with everyone who had been in attendance and every one of them said, No we didn't hold our peace, we were psyched for you, but it was one or all of the people who died or lost touch with who had held their peace? This wedding was fifteen years ago. Several people in attendance had died. Her dad died. The woman was so sure her dad loved her husband too. But what if he was just happy that she was happy, and just crossed his fingers and hoped for the best? Or what if people lied about holding their peace, and said to their faces, We were not holding

our peaces, and/or what if everyone was just going along with this obviously doomed union, because let's face it, love isn't always enough, and maybe more than one person who died had extensive notes on why they thought this marriage was doomed, but held their peace, because they knew people did what they wanted, but then everyone died always having held their peace, leaving the couple to never know what they really thought and/or, moreover, maybe possibly in some universe, changing the course of the couple's history, you know, like if they'd listened, and they were like You're right, love isn't enough, and they went their separate ways and had lives that were better in ways they couldn't have imagined then, since everything seemed so great at the time, but instead they went ahead and got married, because they didn't know there were all these unspoken predictors of doom. If everyone held their peace, and then they died with all their peaces, how would the couple ever know? We were there. We doubt either of them would have listened. But what if they did?

Answers to the Question What Are You Thinking About

2003-2012: Art.

2012-2017: Windows.

She always feels relieved that these are his answers, because the answer is never Someone else or I'm not happy until it is.

They Got A Dog

Once they brought the dog home, sometimes it seemed to the wife like the distribution of affection got proportioned out in such a way that the dog actually got some of what each partner had previously allotted to the other. Versus there's enough love to go around. There's enough love to go around, isn't there?

They Got A King Size Bed

Was this it? Was this it, the beginning of the end? They were living in Texas and they needed a new mattress and the idea was that the queen had been

a bit crowded with her, him (he's tall), and sometimes their eighty-pound dog. So they got a king, but the dog still found ways to make it crowded, and her husband was now literally farther away.

They Got An L-Shaped Sofa

Maybe it was this, was it this? They got an L-shaped sofa and they sat on different sides of it. He stretched out on the side that you're supposed to stretch out on and she stretched out on the other side. Her husband was now literally farther away in two rooms of the house.

They Watched A Show Called Divorce on the L-Shaped Sofa

She had to remind herself that she wasn't superstitious. At some juncture of stepping over cracks and not opening umbrellas indoors, she stopped to realize she had never actually believed in superstitions. Her mother's back did not break. She died of cancer, but she was pretty sure there was no corresponding superstition for that. She did, however, carry on some ill-considered ideas about the power of her thoughts to create realities that were pretty obviously not possible, such as not killing fictional characters based on living people. That dad thing we mentioned earlier fucked her up a bit. For the duration of her marriage, she avoided singing heartbreak songs too, as though this would somehow manifest actual heartbreak. Anyway, they went ahead and watched a show called Divorce on their L-shaped sofa and she thinks now maybe that was all too much.

Should They Just Have Gone Ahead and Gotten One of Those Long-Ass Dining Room Tables Too?

And sat at opposite ends like elderly married royals in a movie who quietly loathe one another and be done with it?

Chicago

She loved Chicago more than she ever loved anything, or at least as much as she'd loved anything. She loved it in her body. She loved it in a romantic way. She loved it in that romantic way where you can list a million details

about why you love a person, but in the end it's not something there are exact right words for.

Leaving Chicago felt like a breakup. A bad breakup, one where you second guess, where you only remember the good, a breakup where you always wonder a little if you should get back together. She thought she was ready. It wasn't a hard decision. Her husband had gotten a grad school fellowship in another city. It was a practical decision. It was her choice, one she made with her partner. Chicago didn't break up with her. She broke up with it. How she knew she loved her husband more than she loved Chicago is that she left Chicago for him. With him.

A Different Book

There could be a whole different book about her relationship to New York City, maybe one day she'll figure out how to write it, maybe she won't, maybe the world does not need another book set in/about growing up in/is a gritty portrait of/is a love letter to New York City. Probably not the latter. Maybe a reconciliation with. Anyway it's a different book. Maybe we can boil it down to its essence here so we can all get on with it. She thinks of New York as one more of her many complicated parents who maybe could have done a better job, but in the end all made her who she is, for better or worse.

I'm leaving! You didn't pay attention to me.

Eight million people live here, sorry not sorry.

I was a little kid. You could have at least hidden a few more exposed dicks.

We had bigger problems back then. You should be grateful. Didn't you always have a roof over your head? Did we not give you a shit ton of art and culture? Did you not go to musicals and concerts and Macy's Day parades and all the museums, did you not go on class trips on the Circle Line, did you not go ice skating in Central Park, did you not see the Rockettes at Radio City and the Nutckracker at Lincoln Center, did you not fucking stand on a stage at Lincoln Center when you were eight years old and sing in the

goddamned opera?

Ok but whatever I can't afford you!

Not my problem.

But you give other people rent-controlled apartments that fall from the sky! You like them better!

That's not true. I love all my eight million children equally.

You don't!

Hey, I did the best I could. You're a grownup now. Figure your shit out.

Everything We Need

She'd fallen in love with Chicago the way some people fall in love with New York, and she never looked back until she and the husband left that beloved city for Texas, and from Texas, New York began to look pretty good. Brooklyn looked even better. She and the husband moved back to New York, found a cute little apartment in Brooklyn. Brooklyn she could get romantic about, it was a good fit for her, but soon they found a whole entire house upstate they could actually afford to buy. This was supposed to be the end of the relocation story, but it wasn't. Jump a couple years ahead and she's ninety minutes away from her friends alone in a house she'd been sharing with the person she thought she'd be with forever. So a few months after the husband moves out, when a friend offers her a place to stay in the East Village, she's down there with the dog and a suitcase the next day. It is understood that this place to stay isn't forever, but it's also understood now that nothing is.

And then here comes her old friend (it's now been requested that we call him the handsome friend; we're still considering the change) who has moved back to New York right at this same time after twenty years away, and he crashes in the East Village apartment with her and ends up staying and this guy is from Ohio, right, this guy is fully in love with New York, and

it's a bit contagious; part of her is like Ok but look at all the trash/it's so crowded/you don't understand, it's where I'm from, think of it as Ohio, and he's like Nobody stays in Ohio who has any sense, she's like I'm just saying I had to leave, sometimes you have to leave where you're from, and he's like Ok, so, you left, and now you're back, and she's like But I can't afford it, and he's like But you are affording it. Look at us. We live in the East Village and we have our bagel shop a block away and we have our deli down the block and we have a movie theater down the block, we have a meeting house two blocks away, our friends are here, we have CENTRAL PARK uptown, we have everything we need.

When she was growing up, Central Park was not her favorite place. Central Park was about muggings and drug dealers and preppy killers and guys masturbating under trees. She tended to avoid it. She lived closer to Riverside Park, and it wasn't like they didn't have all those same things over there too, but that's where she went sledding and played with her friends and ran away to, with nothing but a Partridge Family lunchbox that one afternoon in third grade because she was a lonely latchkey kid and no one understood her (she went home and no one was the wiser and having a roof seemed like a good swap out for being understood). Now her old friend says, Let's get coffee and walk through Central Park with my kid today, let's walk through Central Park with our friends today, and they walk through Central Park with the kid or their friends and they stop to watch performers, or they sit by the fountain, or they go down Poet's Walk, or they complain about the stupid new skinny buildings casting stupid shadows on Sheep Meadow but see that it's still so beautiful, and she sees it through different eyes, a little. A little. A little.

Trees Are Down

A tornado hits their town. Trees are down all over town, roofs are blown off historic buildings on their main street, small businesses destroyed, two lives taken. Her husband is extremely upset about the trees. He was already upset about the trees around town, the way they get trimmed into un-tree like shapes to accommodate electrical wires, or cut down entirely to accommodate one thing or another that isn't a tree. Some of them were pulled right out by the roots. Some of the trees have been split open by the force of the

winds, to reveal that they were rotten inside, he says. It seems like a metaphor.

You think? she says. She does not think. Which kind are we, are we a rotten tree? You wanna do this game? I'm a fucking writer. Maybe your tree is rotten inside but your roots are tangled up in mine. My tree is a goddamn Redwood. My tree is a motherfucking Sequoia all the way through. A tree falls on his client's car. He moves out the day before her birthday.

Tinder Profile

I watch a shit ton of TV, especially late at night when I can't sleep, I watch horror movies and housewife shows and peak TV shows and news shows but not the fake ones. I listen to whatever music I like. Some of it is not considered cool. Fuck you. I write a lot of books. I read a lot of books. I was married for fifteen years. We separated a year ago. I cry all the time still, I can't think about much of anything else. I hope you find that sexy. I don't go to the gym. Fuck the gym. I like flat hikes. I like bike riding where there are no streets. Do not ask me to bike ride in the city, I didn't do it for my husband and I won't do it for you. I eat whatever food I like, but I don't cook and I don't drink. I have no time for your angsty middle-aged bullshit. Grow up. I'm really much nicer than this.

The Color You're In

She has this thing about lifetimes, like how many of them she's had. The borders of the lifetimes are fuzzy, but she has a visual in her head, a timeline of colors, birth-age six (she doesn't remember this lifetime and these colors are not the colors represented in photographs so all we can say about this time is that we don't know what color it is), first grade through fifth which is a bright white, sixth grade through high school is yellow, college is all primary colors, her twenties are blue, her early thirties in New York are purple, her late thirties in Chicago are like an orange and pink and purple sunset, her early forties, her early years with her husband, are a bright grass green, the last few years are muted shades of teal and taupe. She has long had the feeling that she's just getting started, though she begins to have a feeling of being settled after they buy the house. You can't

see the color of now. It might be red. But you can't really see the color you're in until you're in the next color.

While We're Here: Ten Scenarios That Might Have Been Preferable (this bit is dedicated to her dad, who kept a list of top ten ways he was going to die)

1. The wife is stricken with a terrible, fatal illness while they're still in couples therapy. He stays with her out of guilt and she's fine with that. Eventually he realizes what a heinous mistake he was about to make and spends the rest of her living days atoning by reading to her, washing her hair, and bearing gifts of fine jewelry.
2. The husband falls from a second floor window at the client's house while he's still in couples therapy with the wife. She outfits the home with a ramp and one of those chairlifts that runs up the stairs and when he returns home from the hospital she cares for him for the rest of his living days. He realizes how lucky he was to have her all those years and spends the rest of his living days expressing his gratitude.
3. The wife, still conscious on her deathbed after falling down in front of a car years before the horrible client comes into the picture, years before they ever go to couples therapy, tells her husband not to cry, that even though she had a short life, she had everything she ever wanted, and she coughs an operatic cough and dabs her head with a lacy handkerchief and expires.
4. Returning from couples therapy round three, where they've finally made a breakthrough, pledging their renewed love, they both die in a car accident because the husband is tailgating and there's a tailgater behind them and the car in front of them slows down and there's a pileup. The client shows up at the funeral and the wife's friends stop her at the door and say Yeah, no, bye and then everyone says nice things about how much they loved both of them and how right they were for each other even though the husband went on a stupid walkabout.
5. A year after separating, the wife slips into some morbid reflection and writes it down and then one of these grim scenarios actually happens because that's the superpower she's burdened with, and she has to live with it, on earth or in eternity, depending on which way it goes.
6. Decades after separating and never getting divorced, the husband and

POETRY

“Recieve” and “A New Book on Fever”

Emily Vizzo

Receive

My neighbor brings a giant crane the day
California shelter begins. Drops down a storage shed

And for days there is buzzing, and sawing, and screwing.
Bees hop in and out of the poppies; there’s cold wind

Some days in the lemon trees and other days the train
Braids hum with the freeway freight trucks.

I scrub my heels with a blue egg. Tar coats my feet
With tiny black balls, my hair comes clean with a whoosh

Of banana shampoo and lavender oil. You would think
Each day might become more credible, the shed growing

Eaves, the foot finally letting loose its ocean muck. But in the
Morning it’s again, the same avocado orchards visible

Stepping the mountain, the dying jasmine, the fretful gnats,
I clean my teeth, pare a fingernail, keep time the smash of grief.

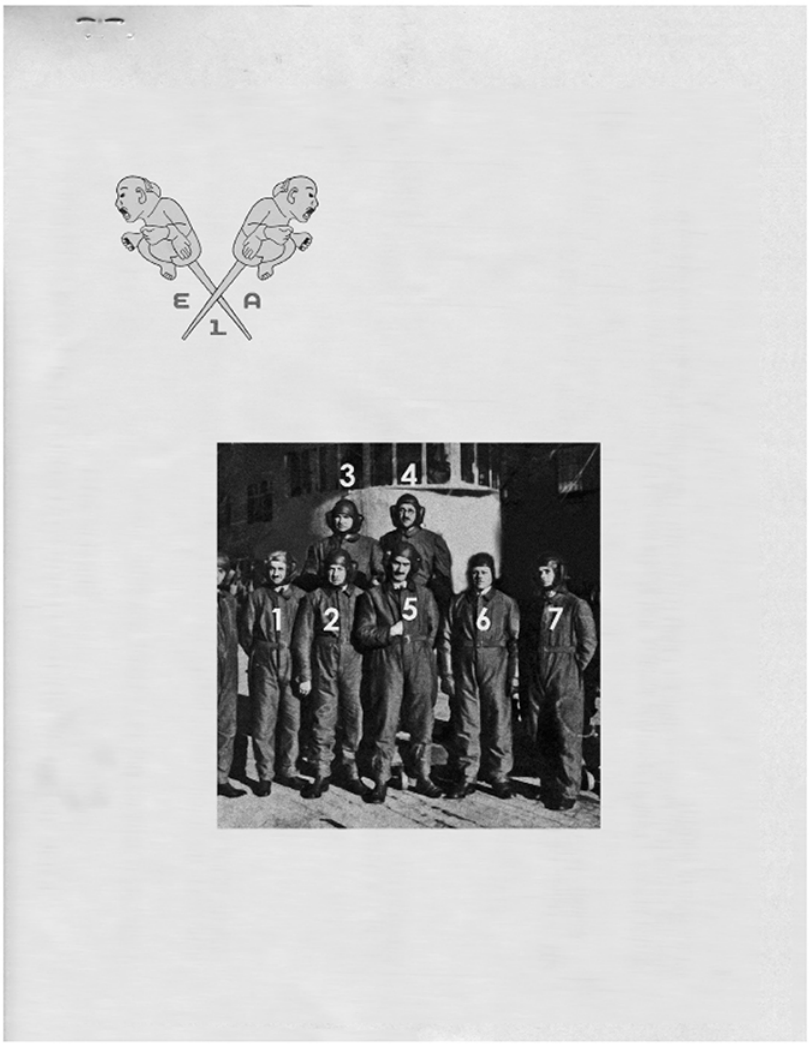
A New Book on Fever

The cardiologist tells me his father is home from surgery. He can't sleep, I can't sleep, it's humid and still and Italy is far away. I've got my hands wrapped around a passed instant, he had bit my neck like I was a horse and all went still, I was put into creamery bowls of silence, Roman stone heaving through the walls, his diagram of the heart on a bookshelf, a sporting racket on the floor. I teach him words: avidity, trumpet flower, tempestuous. He walks me to F hospital on a tiny island, points to the cathedral where his parents married, laughs at the Italian I choose for cup. The artichokes are in season. They are closing the Swiss border. The cardiologist is not concerned: Wash your hands, he says. Each night birds scream over the botanical grounds. I hear them from bed, turn like a cold envelope one way, then differently, then each toe finding a hot garden, each careful safeness landsliding away.

MULTIMEDIA

ZAD MANIFESTO

Sesshu Foster and Arturo Ernesto Romo



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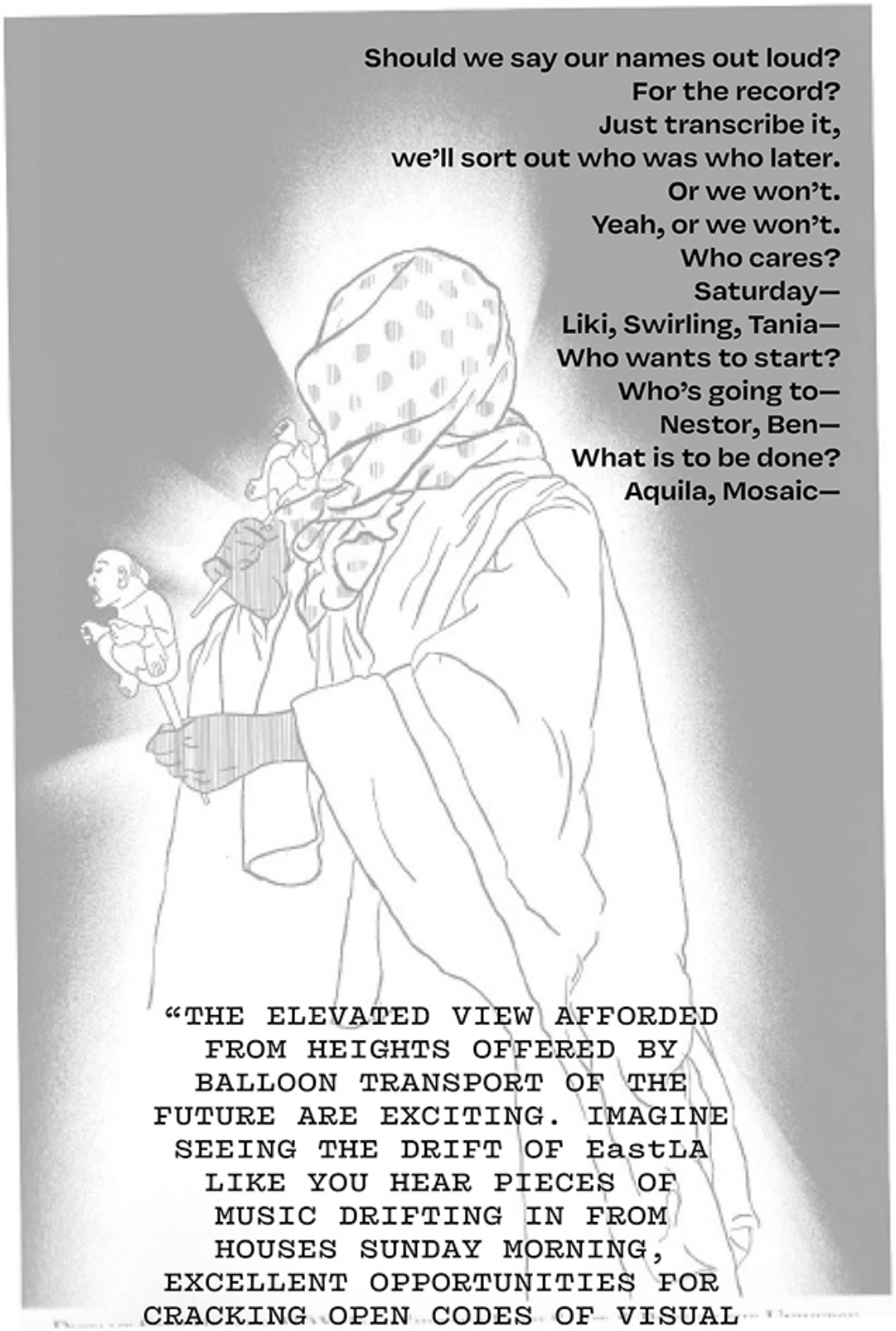


"THE ELEVATED VIEW AFFORDED FROM HEIGHTS OFFERED BY BALLOON TRANSPORT OF THE FUTURE ARE EXCITING. IMAGINE SEEING THE DRIFT OF EastLA LIKE YOU HEAR PIECES OF MUSIC DRIFTING IN FROM HOUSES SUNDAY MORNING, EXCELLENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR CRACKING OPEN CODES OF VISUAL INTERFERENCE."

—*ZAD MANIFESTO*, 2010

This is what we must do.

Recapture imagination colonized by internal combustion formats of Hollywood, since the movie industry with its posters of glowering stars brandishing fire arms like big dicks is only the commercial organ of the largest arms export corporations in the world, Colt, Armalite, Sturm, Ruger & Co., U.S. Fire Arms Mfg Co., etc. and U.S. is the largest arms exporter in the world, troops deployed in over 150 countries, in combat in half a dozen at any given moment. (Do these trash movies & exciting wars make Americans happy? No, the suicide rate is twice the murder rate, with 34,000 people killing themselves each year, 94 or so every day, whereas only 17,000 people are murdered annually, which is interestingly more than Mexico in spite of its drug war, curious don't you think?)

What else do we got?

No jobs, eh. They've fucked up the schools with bureaucracy, testing, bullshit, fees, poverty, they polluted the earth, water, killed off all the fish in the rivers, threw plastic and giant oil spills in the ocean, blighted the cities and infrastructure. All the money went to banks and Wall Street and they told the people, go have fun with your wars. (Predator drone strikes—UAV—unmanned aerial vehicle – $10,500,000 each General Atomics "Reaper"—target and kill thousands in Yemen, Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, etc., 30% of attack deaths are civilian noncombatants, women and children. Drones receive feed control from Creech Air Force Base outside of Las Vegas.) Visions of global skies, grand cumulus drift on the atmosphere above glittering seas. Caribbean light values. Shades include prairie sage, egg cream, and coral violet.

What's that about?

Waves lapping, an incoming tide. Rising wind.

Marine breezes, luminous cloud banks rising over the horizon.

Oh, in other words, we give 'em metaphors and stuff. Same stuff writers and artists always give them. What good is that?

Call it "new ways of seeing," we call it "alternative lifestyle," call it "human powered flight," "Ennoblement of Water," or "Implosion Machine."

We could tell them—

Tell them a story.

Implement narrative—

Implement overarching narratives.

Like, maybe we can come up with new ones!

CAN SOMEBODY GIVE US A GRANT FOR IT?

You know anybody?

Creative Capital won't do it. They said nobody's in charge of us.

The fuckers.

Yeah.

How do we start?

Men with brutal faces skyward. Leaping.

Orchestral arrangements?

Women with perfect teeth. Much leaping.

Musculature choreographed to appear and disappear behind hair, or khaki.

Flapping of canvas in a hard wind, wind whistling through guy wires.

Calendar above a tool bench at the rear of a garage. Calendar leaves begin flapping as in a hard wind, the years flying off. The crackling of fire grows louder.

Piles of titty magazines in stench of mildew and rat droppings. Coke bottle crates, empty oil cans. Acres of junk car bodies, quonset huts out in the boulders and Joshua trees. California fire season radio broadcast.

Women widening their eyes. Casting a significant glance.

Men flaring nostrils, setting their lips in a line.

“Completing its first circumnavigation of the globe in less than 22 days, the Graf Zeppelin under the command of Doctor Hugo Eckener arrives over the Manhattan skyline June 5, 1931, as the first streaks of light penetrate a gray dawn.”

“Berlin–New York City two days. Friedrichshafen–Rio de Janeiro 2 days.”

Here’s your ticket on the Rock Island Line.

I hear the crows snickering and chortling.

So—

Ah—

Yeah.

What’s the story?

Plans go back to the turn of the last century. Personal hygiene in the upper atmosphere. Austrian forester Viktor Schauberger’s water vortex implosion machines. Nikola Tesla’s Colorado Springs experiments to transfer energy through longitudinal waves to telautomatic objects. Porous skin shining metallic in the glare (filters).

Glints of hard sunlight on flexing bodies.

~~Heaving breast. Clapping—~~

~~Robert Desnos dying at Terezín (Theresienstadt)~~

It’s a movie.

It’s a movie of the imagination.

An imaginary—

No.

It’s not—

Not imaginary. Not an imaginary movie. It’s of the actual or factual or real imagination.

Movie of the imagination.

Like pseudographic cinema: Asco’s No Movies—impressions of factuality, projecting the real.

Do we make this movie ourselves?

Let’s get somebody to make this movie.

Who can we get?

I have their files:

Chicana Power Bumpersticker, flamboyant hair, last time I saw her she moved back from Mexico City. She had run from El Paso, TX (van-supported) to D.F., Mexico City in support of rights for indigenous peoples and was living there. She could be the most charismatic lead actress and probably the love interest.

Compa He Called Me, went from guerrillero to wandering poet on his way to NYC through any number of lives, he asked me for contacts in the East. Could reappear at any time for supporting role as Engineer Who Fixes Everything At the Last Minute, adding to the suspense.

Pirate Radio, one night I was cleaning out an apartment I had already moved out of, carrying the last bag of trash downstairs to the street and he walks out of the dark, asking for directions. "Oh, it's you!" he said when we both stepped under the street light. Years before that, I met this vato in Iowa City (born Durango MX); when he came to L.A., I sent him to my cousin, who put him up till he found a place. Campus radical, led lots of tours till he went underground, but you might hear him some midnights coming out of pirate radio, announcing his Nahua name. He is exactly the authority figure we need for a pilot and commander.

Hecho en Aztlan, always working two jobs, raising his son alone in that house on a hill. He must've shown, at some point, the son the same foto he showed me: the scraggly bunch of revolutionaries out in the desert twenty years before, him holding something like a single shot .22 carbine. The son, in his black rocker t-shirts and skinny black pants, Converse All-stars, kept wondering why his dad has to be such a hard-ass. Both could easily do that love-hate buddy routine that audiences always love so well.

Tamale Lady, sometimes sells 3 kinds of tamales out of buckets from the back of her station wagon in the parking lot of the Alhambra Market. I don't really know anything about her, like if she has experience at anything like this or whatever, but it might be good to ask her. She might run our whole operation, with all kinds of logistical experience dealing with difficulties of all kinds, getting people out of jail, etc.

Grandma Walsh, used to talk to dozens of cats underneath the fruit trees in the front yard, smell of rotten peaches, a very nice person, gone for a long time I expect, now the yard is full of dead cars, I think

she could still be talked into lending us outstanding screen presence.

Joker, obsidian eyes like laughing flint, what a joker! He has his scars (no, we don't want to see the false teeth); he's been shot at least once. He has his secrets (secret family in another city). He has gambling debts and death threats; those are forgotten. Such a loveable rogue, so funny, what a storyteller, such a joker. Could be a lead actor, whose facile exterior hides a heart of gold, has a thing for lead actress, whatever.

Mytili Jagannathan, Philadelphia poet, once led a group of us on a tour of Philadelphia Chinatown. This one has a somewhat different script, but I know for a fact she could handle the gig. Tremendous poise and flashing dark eyes of an air commander. I see her as our crack attack dirigible pilot.

Guatemalteco, print shop owner, soccer man, plays the over thirty league, using profits from the business to sponsor a girl's club team, hires a professional coach. Took the girls on a Central American tour where they made region play-offs, yes indeed. He doesn't really have the time, but you know, he might just be talked into supporting role as character actor.

Samba Pa Ti, hopefully he still blasts out those songs like Billy Bragg accompanying himself on a lone electric guitar. I never gave him enough credit for that. Last seen by my brother wearing the blue helmet of UN peacekeepers, waving at the TV cameras in Bosnia. Where are you, my brother? No one is better qualified to be secret agent and gay love interest. First Aid/CPR certified.

81 But Looks 59, came to Calif. in 1920 as photographer's assistant to Edward Weston, WPA photographer in San Francisco, ship welder during World War 2 (steel splinter destroyed the sight in one eye), this old dude scares us every time we go to Redondo Beach he swims so far beyond the breakers you can't even see him. Expert haggler at Grand Central Market over old, wilated vegetables; they can't pull nothing on him. Often says, "doctors just want your money." If he gives you food throw it away. Perfect for the role of Enrique Pico, Chief Financial Officer of the East Los Angeles Dirigible Transport Lines.

Oh yeah ha,

I once wrote to debunk hoaxes and myths, but as I progressed on each debunking project, I would become more and more confused. I realized that the sighting of anomalies was by nature and definition anomalous. Furthermore, I realized that all anomaly is really variation. I began to see all variation and change as anomalous and in consequence many mundane things in the world; flowing water, growing hair, roadkill, movement of bodies, acceleration and even stasis became as odd and frightening to me as mothman, chupacabra or cattle mutilation.

And slowly, my recognition of the anomalous spread to include more and more of the things around me until everything that filled my senses was foreign and struck terror in me: a boy's head cracked by a policeman's fist, my voice slipping across the wind, Lopez-Feliu's hair growing year by year, iron against lubricated iron, a skyscraper falling in a pile, the rapidly worming distances between my eyes and distant views . . .

I don’t know all of them, personally I mean.

You think?

I know—

Yeah, we can get ‘em.

But a couple of ‘em—didn’t they pass away, like die already?

Well. Maybe.

You plan on digitally re-creating them?

If we have to. From records, audio files, MP3 files, CGI scans, telemetronic measurements, old photographs, overdubbing, YouTube videos, forensic science with insects, seeds and spores, Shadow Lengthening Imagery and

Vegetal Echolocation.

The hard part is to get people to commit, to actually do it.

I know, right?

We have to practically force them.

Yeah, practically.

Well, not practically.

Yeah, actually, we will force them to.

We'll just force them.

They have to.

They do.

Otherwise it doesn't get done.

Otherwise nothing gets done.

Yeah.

We can't let them hold us up.

We can't let anything stand in our way.

Nobody is stopping us.

Even if they're dead. We'll reconstitute them from electrical files, electron images, shadow research and stuff.

We can probably do it.

I'm sure we can.

All is now in flux and changing, everything is anomalous and hoax; even the hoax and story of gravity only dictates one direction of many directions and can be called into question as readily as the moth-man hoax — our blood flows up and down, across and back, pumped by a strange hoax — the heart muscle, flowing through strange mythic channels called veins. These words follow a mythical set of systems to be-
come a strangely manifest hoax. The myth of dictated words in mythical symbols representing ideas (themselves anomalous and deceptive) laid down in quick drying hoax-ink on a mythical and unprovable substrate.

This paper that you hold in your hand and the content on it and the brain functions that lead you to understand it are all unprovable hoaxes perpetuated by over-active imaginations susceptible to the influence of myth.

"On", "over", "on top", "based on"...all orientation and relation is ghostlike and anomalous. Directionality and placement, composition and divine order are hoaxes and mythologies.

I'm thinking we exist and ultimately are mythical—like a play

I think we may have to, in some cases.

We'll figure out some way.

It will be interesting, to say the least.

How will they get paid?

We'll pay them later.

I guess so.

We'll probably have to.

Yeah, because, like—

It's not like we have any funds.

We have a methodology.

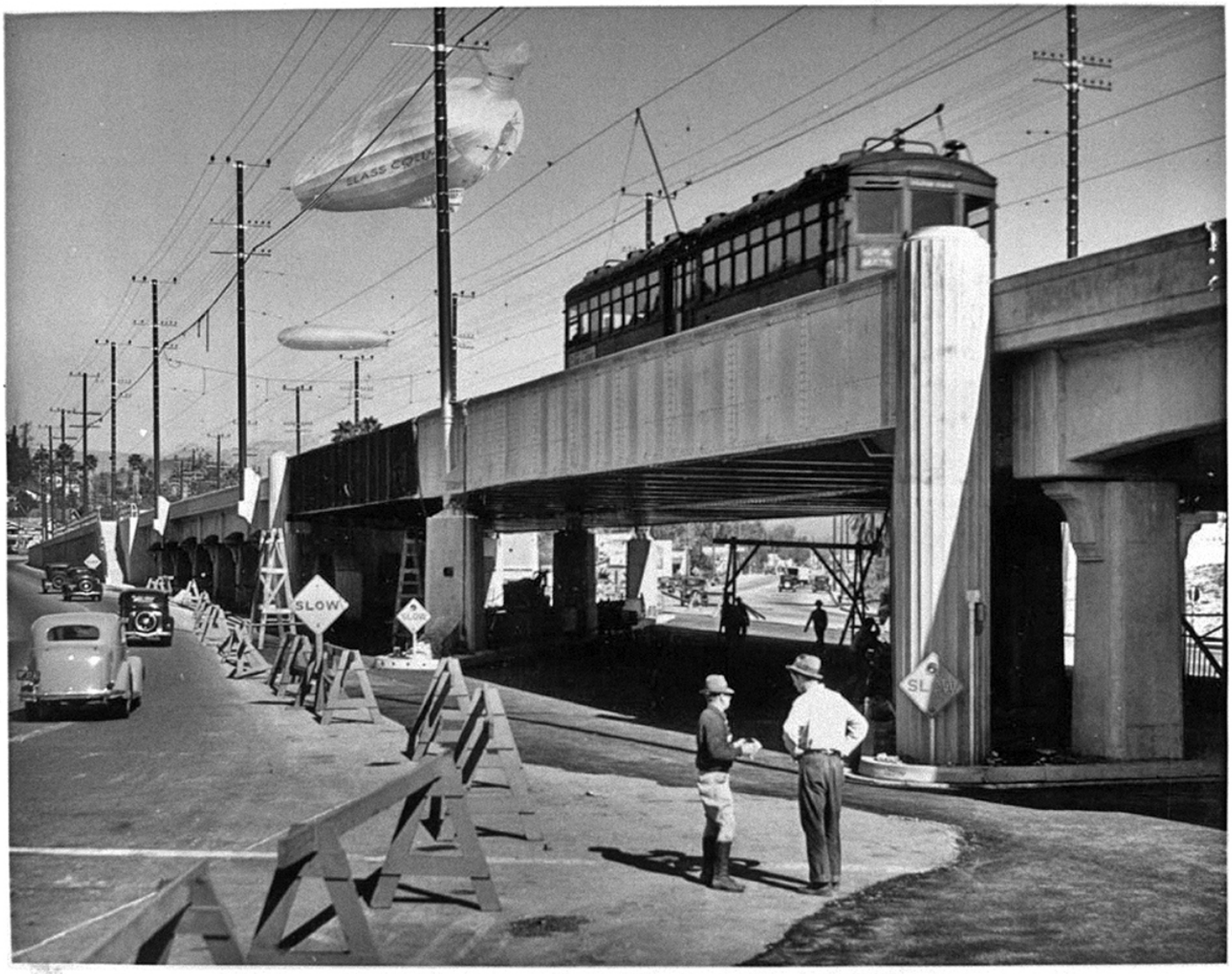
We have the methodology of ontology.

Pass me that, would you?

The tea?

with no director or audience, no script or stage, no actors, no props…for reference please see mirror scene in ZAD, mythical movie from the hoax year of 2016.

(MY SUBMISSION FOR THE METRO GOLD LINE STATION EXTENSION INTO EL SERENO WAS REJECTED BECAUSE IT INCLUDED A DOCKING STATION FOR FUTURE DIRIGIBLE PROJECTS. THEY ALSO SAID IT RESEMBLED SACRIFICIAL STEPS OF ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS AND THEY DIDN'T LIKE THAT)



(WE KNOW THAT ALL THINGS ARE INTERCONNECTED AND RELATED AND THAT IT’S THE LINKS AND RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN DIFFERENCES THAT MAKE UP THE COMPLEX ARCHITECTURE OF REALITY)

Gracias.

Methodological ontology.
Did you get that from
Cal State L.A.?

When I was a teenager,
I used to read a lot.

We'll pay them in ontology?
Ontologically?

It'll have to be an all-volunteer force, at least at the beginning.

Looks like it!

Harry Gamboa gives people food,
when he's directing his movies.

We can try that. Maybe we can get Harry to direct.

He's always busy. But maybe. It could be good to have a big name director like that.

Nobody knows Liki Renteria.

Not yet, anyway.

But one day!

Because, for example, check this out. This is my idea: first—we somehow make this movie, then—

Then we can pay our people—

Well, maybe. I'm thinking we use the money we raise to build actual East L.A. Dirigible Air Transport Lines, fashioned after the imaginary one built out of—

Ontology.

—out of preconceptions and misjudgments, Colima dogs and queso fresco—

—out of peanut butter and bamboo sticks, Ray Foster's let-

ters and old lawn mowers, things that should've been said but weren't, afixed in the last light of afternoon—

—Manny's Special Burrito, if you can eat the whole thing you get it free, with added lift from the uncle who always said, "You're gonna turn out to be the scum of the earth like your old man!"—

—cracked pieces of Bakelite radios and toasters, ceramic tile, electrical tape, rabbit skin, willow sticks, laundry baskets, ironing boards, Big Wheels, wind-up toys, piggy banks—

—condoms (to be safe), unbreakable plastic combs (with the teeth broken) all dried out by still smelling like hair oil, Roosevelt dimes, axe handles—

—writ of Habeas Corpus, needlenose pliers, recycled LAUSD textbooks, parts of Oldsmobiles, American Motors, International Harvesters, Packards, Plymouths, Pontiacs, Hummers, Saturns and 100% recycled parts of car companies that no longer exist—

—we will be green, everything shall be recycled or recycleable: ideas and identities, personal issues and the air that we breathe, time (the long hand and the short hand go round and round)—

~~Love scene, moon over Acapulco Bay—~~

—recycled from wasted lives, from getting hit in the forehead with a brick, from pissing your life away in bars, from not having anything to say anymore—

—plus Biktor Schauberter's astonishing Implosion Engine technology, Nikola Tesla's longitudinal wave energy transfer broadcasters and receivers, based on the newly discovered

Colorado patent interviews—

First the idea—

Like a dream almost.

Then we develop images—

Models, functioning prototypes, more or less. Hard to tell till we build some of them.

We'll need a lot of space for the materials.

Sensory details, chicken wire, and PVC pipe.

No PVC pipe. I'd rather use bamboo and natural hemp cordage.

No bamboo then.

Ay! Lame!

Ha ha ha!

Wide landing fields like veritable open plains. Like steppes.

Like El Monte in the 1950s.

~~Love scene, roaring river far below vast as an inland sea, accidental fire—~~

We'll expropriate abandoned aerospace buildings out by the Burbank airport. There's dead sections of the industrial landscape out there, probably some come with hangars attached.

Probably.

And closer to downtown, certainly there's abandoned industrial buildings with vacant warehouse space in El Sereno along the railroad tracks.

That will work perfectly.

So that's the plan.

You got the story?

I got lots of notes. I'm always taking notes. Stuff is always coming to me. It feels like having something in your eye, so you have to get it down.

Men with brutal faces, leaping skyward. Rising into the sky.

Women tossing hair. Looking over their shoulder, hip cocked.

Legs and arms akimbo. Tattered fabric flapping in stiff wind like flags.

Trolley careening around a bend on an embankment above Huntington Drive, 1930s—

Parachutes descending through clouds.

Clouds whipping through guy wires.

It's a kind of aerial ballet.

Mechanized to an extent.

A new civilization.

The possibility for one.

Sort of like going back into the past to alter the future.

Women with perfect teeth. Arched eyebrows, cute crinkly nosed squint. Crinkly skin of desire—

Clock faces, gauges, dashboard instruments. All technical.

~~People watching from balconies—~~

Women with strong shoulders, rising into the sky. Pert square or boyish shoulders.

Tania, everybody agrees with that.

I still want that in there.

It’s on the tape.

Stiff wind in the wardrobe. Coffee whipped out of the cup by wind, drops driven across a smooth surface, when you look down the cup is empty (in a 1930s way)—

Someone behind the curtains—

Love interest gets a severe haircut? Occasioning a disturbance, setting off a running gun battle? An aerial duel between fleets of airships?

We gotta come up with some better than—

Stale stuff—

Yeah, don’t worry.

If nothing else, we’re masters at improvising.

We'll see. Just call 1-800-DIRGIBL.

Ay! Lame!

Ha ha ha!

Shadows of attacking ships emerging from the cloud bank are thrown onto the the dirigibles below.

Crew choice when the ship goes down in flames, burn with the ship or leap to certain death. The sad choice of duty. Analogous to war capitalism where you burn in the ship or leap into space.

(You knew what you were signing up for, kids.)

Laying down your life for your fellow man (Merrill Lynch, Chase Bank, Lehman Brothers, etc.) in a world that is forever at war.

She always has new tattoos. One day she's covered in Japanese camellias, and the next time she reveals skin they've become robots. It's a running gag. She explains how to create new tattoos out of old by ingenious designs where you rewrite over the previous ones on a continuing basis.

Lots of coincidental revelation of skin.

Human skin, soft. Taut dirigible skin.

She has a praying mantis as a pet. She talks to it.

Maybe it could do the voice-over.

Explosions rock the ship.

Like BP Deep Horizon, they only have a few minutes before the

platform is consumed.

Only one parachute, you know what this means.

No, you take it.

No, you.

No, you.

He thrusts it at her and steps to the open (door?), says, goodbye my dear.

Jumps.

She straps on the parachute and leaps overboard to try to save him, plunging through atmospheres. Will she reach him in time to pull the cord?

~~Why didn't he think of that first?~~

Shot of the praying mantis, light green as a spring rain, swaying delicately on the shuddering or cracked guages of the console.

Praying mantis voice over—unintelligible squeaking, blotted out by sounds of destruction.
Those insects can't even make any noise, do they?

Maybe they make a crunchy sounds when they chomp up their mates.

Just when all seems lost, East L.A. Dirigible Transport Lines on fire, shot to pieces, some going down in flames (proud ELA-DATL flagship Colima, with its distinctive dog head consumed by a BALL OF FIRE, still proudly upholding its dog head)—sprouting tiny white parachutes like dandelion seeds in the

blurry air smudged with columns of smoke, the heroine plunges through the air seeking out what's his name, who jumped with no chute. Suddenly, far above, out of the columns of smoke and storm front cloud banks, appear the giant tentacles of Kraken, the—

What's that? Like a giant octopus?

It comes out of the clouds, a giant sort of puppet octopus?

Yeah! It crushes the fascist zeppelins of the reactionary forces and saves the day.

WTF?

It's another metaphor. One metaphor is saved by another.

Really?

Oh, I don't know.

Can we do that?

Can we do what? Make a giant Kraken octopus out of papier-maché, so that it doesn't look like "The Giant Claw" monster from 1957, operate it from wires and drop it through cumulus cloud banks and swirling black smoke?

We'll have our technical experts work on it. Special effects!

It's doable. They can bail out AIG and Detroit, we can bail out East L.A. Dirigible Transport with a Kraken.

They didn't bail out Detroit! They bailed out car companies.

Kraken, out of the sky? Out of clouds?

Out of the unknown Trash Vortex.

Trash Vortex? In the sky?

What about the leads, will they be saved?

You’ll have to see it to find out.

Maybe they end up in Sky City
in the Trash Vortex.

A sequel!

Is the praying
mantis saved?

Watch to find out!

A Martian Named Smith

Mark Haskell Smith

"Sex is like a sandwich," my father told me. I was fourteen, and he was convinced that this metaphor would convey his philosophy of intimacy in a way that an adolescent could understand.

"A sandwich that you share with someone. You both enjoy it. And when you're done, that's it."

The whole idea seemed ephemeral to me, even if I didn't know what ephemeral meant.

"That's it?" I asked.

"You can have another one later if you want. Or you can share a sandwich with someone else."

I had no idea what he was talking about; I was a bookish, nerdy kid with debilitating hay fever. I had spent most of my youth in a Sudafed haze devouring the works of Franklin W. Dixon and Ian Fleming in my bedroom. My only experience with other people's bodies involved the few occasions that the kids in our neighborhood went down to the creek to take turns watching each other pee.

The father-son talk was light on anatomical details and reproductive theory; he seemed to think the sandwich metaphor was enough. Until he added: "Oh, and if you get a girl pregnant, you don't have to marry her. You don't have to have anything to do with her or the kid."

This explains everything you need to know about my dad. He was a terrible father, prone to rages and violence when he was younger. Once he'd

abandoned us and was free from the obligations of parenthood, he was aloof and caustic, and on the rare occasions that we did see him, he reserved his parental input to mockery and useless, even insulting advice.

As an afterthought, he handed me a thick paperback.

"Here," he said. "Grok this." The book was *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Robert A. Heinlein. The word grok appeared as part of the cover design.

Grok is the only Martian word in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which defines it as: "to understand intuitively or by empathy, to establish rapport with." But there's more to it than just that. In Heinlein's world, to grok is to drink something in, to absorb it fully, to contemplate deeply and intuitively. Or as the protagonist, Valentine Michael Smith, says, "You need to think in Martian to grok the word 'grok'."

Smith is the Martian in question. (The working title of the novel was *A Martian Named Smith*.) The illegitimate child of human scientists on a disastrous mission to the red planet, he becomes a kind of intergalactic feral child, raised by Martians instead of wolves. Smith combines the innocent curiosity of Chauncey Gardiner, the intelligence of Stephen Hawking, and the psychic powers of Carrie White. He is oblivious and formidable.

Returned to Earth, he becomes entangled in a plot that pits the government and various religious orders against him and each other. He is ultimately rescued by a nurse he has befriended and a famous author. In a twist that stretches credulity, he becomes fantastically wealthy. Smith then proceeds to do what the Sacramento rock band Cake contemplate in their song "Comfort Eagle" ("We are building a religion/We are building it bigger") and creates the neopagan, sex positive "Church of All Worlds." You probably won't be surprised that, in the end, Smith gets what any person with special insight and powers gets when they become mixed up with organized religion.

When I was a teenager, *Stranger in a Strange Land* became a touchstone book for me, one of those novels that changed me in some elemental way. You might even say that it was the only thing my father ever gave me—the only good thing anyway. And yet, the novel has its own weird history. The version published in 1961—the copy my father gave me, the first science fiction novel to grace *The New York Times* bestseller list—had been heavily edited in the process of publication. Sixty thousand words were cut. In 1991, thirty years later and three years after Heinlein's death, his widow released a new edition with the cuts restored.

It is not an improvement. Reading it, as I did recently, is like meeting up with an old lover and realizing that not only has the fire burned out, but you also have no idea what attracted you in the first place. Maybe the moral here is less is more. Maybe restoring all those words was not a great idea. Editors do what they do for a reason. At their best, they are collaborators, protecting writers from their own hubris. Admittedly, I brought a rollaboard of emotional baggage to the experience, but *Stranger in a Strange Land*—the expanded dance remix version, in any case—may be most useful as a lesson about accepting disappointments and managing expectations. A cautionary tale about the choices we make.

That said, there were some things I recognized in the novel. Fun science fiction stuff—self-driving air taxis and robot kitchens that prepare food at the push of a button—the kind of futuristic touches that give the story its Elon-Musk-meets-*The-Jetsons* charm. Perhaps its lasting strength comes from Heinlein's philosophical ruminations on society.

"It was not possible to separate in the Martian tongue," he writes, "the human concepts: 'religion,' 'philosophy,' and 'science'—and, since Mike thought in Martian, it was not possible for him to tell them apart."

Heinlein uses Smith's naiveté and inquisitive Martian mind to excavate various Earth-bound societal systems—like government and religion—and comment on what people used to call "hang ups." His Martians, it turns out, were not that different from my father; they dug free love and waterbeds— it wouldn't have surprised me if the Mars Rover had discovered Martians sitting on shag carpets and eating fondue—and were on a kind of hazy spiritual quest. Heinlein's novel may be science fiction, but it is really a guidebook for how to be in contemporary society—at least society as it was at that time.

As Smith tries to figure out how a person should live in the world in a meaningful way, so too was my father. *Stranger in a Strange Land* resonated with him somehow. As did *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, a bestselling novel narrated by a bird. It doesn't surprise me that he loved these books, since both are about oddball nonconformists, a Martian and a seagull, who break with social norms and strike out on their own. That was exactly what my father was trying to do. Passing this book along was his attempt to explain to me who he was. Maybe he hoped it would provide some kind of guidance.

Why not let a Martian be a role model for his bookish son?

As I grew older, I began to develop some empathy for this man who just wanted to party with his friends. He never really had a job or a career, sustaining himself instead with a series of schemes—helping to broker a real estate deal for a shopping mall, developing a derelict part of Kansas City into a hub of restaurants and bars. I'm not sure how he inserted himself into those deals, but I think it had to do with his natural likeability. Even if his children were less than enthusiastic about him, he was loved by his friends.

At the age when most people retire, my father unburdened himself of his possessions, joined the Peace Corps, and moved to Romania. Before he left, he gave me one more gift. He presented it with some ceremony, as if I had been knighted or received a Nobel Prize. I recognized it as one of his prized possessions, a talismanic object, an icon from the altar of his self-obsession. It was a paperweight, heavy as an anchor, that spelled out the word GROK in sandcast iron.

"Every writer needs inspiration," he said.

I can't say the paperweight inspires me. It is, however, very good at what it was designed to do. And I suppose it did lead me back to Heinlein's work, to see if the book that meant so much to me as a teenager had anything to say to me now.

My father loved Romania. He found the people friendly, the countryside beautiful, and "good wine was fifty cents a liter." I'm not sure what he did for the Peace Corps. No one really knew. But he continued with his schemes: trying to convince my younger brother to marry a Romanian doctor so she could come to the United States and once calling me excitedly about a deal for a winery in the mountains that could be purchased for five thousand dollars. He wanted to retire there, in the rolling hills of central Romania, and make wine until he died. Not that he knew anything about winemaking. But like Heinlein's Martian named Smith, this other Smith, my father, was trying to find his place in the world. He was grokking everything and everyone. He was following his bliss.

To his everlasting credit, he never got involved with religion.

My father had no money and few possessions when he died. He did leave me a Balinese ceremonial sword he bought in Bucharest—a weird thing to carry on the flight home from Europe—and instructions to sell it for a lot of cash. Like many of his schemes, it turned out to be worthless. But I do like the paperweight. It's a constant reminder to GROK. A hefty slab of iron encouraging me to think and feel deeply.

RESPONSES

Hitched

Nancy Lord

After a long summer of drought, fire, and smoky skies, the sharp clarity of autumn has arrived. There has been dusting, like confectioners' sugar, on the mountains for the last week, but this morning broke to blinding brightness, a snowline halfway to tidewater. The sun, just clearing treetops, pours in from a brilliant sky laced with shredding filaments of cloud. It plays over the slough, sparking the water like so many flickering stars, its own cosmos.

As I settle against the lee of a gravel bank, I consider where I am. I work backwards: Universe, Solar System, Earth, Pacific Ocean. Gulf of Alaska. Cook Inlet. Kachemak Bay. A bay within the bay. A cove within that bay. A slough at the head of the cove.

My magic place I will not name.

The tide is pulling out in a hurry, uncovering mud flecked with clamshells, a rim of fluorescent-green algae, beds of thickly tangled eelgrass. The faint smell of wet earth, its tiny organisms easing into decay, reminds me again of the turning of seasons, the circling round, the approaching winter that will muffle this world before, eventually, birthing new life.

Behind me on the beach lies a tideline of stranded jellyfish, strung out like an archipelago. There are hundreds. Many are as large as platters, their colors deep red, purple, yellow, brown, and white. They washed up yesterday, on a storm tide, and they were beautiful—such ornate architecture, symmetries of line and pattern, colors pale and bright. Their translucent bells shielded globular and feathery masses of reproductive parts and strands of tentacles. Now, they're drying out, collapsed over the stones beneath them,

glazed like melted plastic. Some I recognize as sea nettles. Others I have never seen before.

Wind rattles the alder leaves beside me—leaves crisp at their edges, browning and curling. Now and then, one breaks free to twirl acrobatically to the beach, where it skitters over pebbled ground.

Farther off, the deeper melancholia of wind in spruce forest: needles swishing, branches knocking, the creak of one tree leaning into another, the crescendo of a gust working through. Farther yet, the rhythmic crashing of waves along the shore and an emphatic cymbal strike against the rocky point.

Between bursts of wind, bird voices float from the forest. I focus on the familiar dee-deeing of the chickadees and the lighter notes of the kinglets, those flitty small birds I've only recently begun to recognize by sound. Late in life, I've made one of my ambitions to hear the differences between a black-capped chickadee and a boreal one, between a ruby-crowned and a golden-crowned kinglet.

Despite all that is right in the natural world, I'm troubled by what is not: the summer's drought, which led to water shortages in nearby villages and a wildfire that burned for months, closing off a major highway; the leafless, stick-bare blueberry bushes; more dead, broken spruce trees, killed by bark beetles after the aphid attacks that sucked the juice from needles.

And the jellyfish.

What I know about jellyfish: They are not fish at all, but gelatinous zooplankton. They have a short lifespan, usually only a few months as adults, the Medusa form of bell and tentacle. They have lived in our oceans for at least 500 million years and are remarkably resilient. They have been under-studied by scientists because they lack commercial value, yet they may play key roles in ocean ecosystems as well as contributing to biomedical research.

And this: A global increase in jellyfish blooms has scientists concerned. Jellyfish resilience makes them well-adapted to changing ocean conditions that stress other species. Specifically, they not only survive but can multiply rapidly in warmer, more acidic, and less oxygenated conditions.

Warmer, more acidic, and less oxygenated conditions are exactly what we're getting these days, these years, as a result of greenhouse gas emissions. Marine heat waves used to be rare occurrences but are now common, disrupting the ocean environment. "The Blob," a mass of warm water

in the North Pacific, appears in NASA's images like a giant red sore covering a vast area of ocean, from Alaska to California. Between 2014 and 2016, it was linked to devastating environmental change. Starved seabirds washed up on our beaches. Toxic algal blooms proliferated. Whales and other marine mammals died. Warm water fish showed up well north of their usual ranges, and cold-water cod disappeared. Salmon runs crashed.

In 2019, "The Blob" returned, with water temperatures in the North Pacific five degrees Fahrenheit above what is considered "normal."

If warming continues on the current trajectory, scientists say, marine heat waves will become many times more frequent than they have been and will cover more area and last longer. Parts of our oceans may remain in continuous states of extreme heat. "The Blob" may become a permanent feature of our maps—and our lives.

Ocean temperature is hitched to plankton production, to algal blooms, to whale migrations, and to such phenomena as hurricanes and droughts, in ways that are difficult, measurably and causally, to prove. But we know that up to 90 percent of the warming caused by human carbon emissions is absorbed by our oceans and that they are heating up considerably faster than scientists have predicted.

Each day, these lines and knots tighten in their connections. More corals are bleaching. Fish biomasses are dropping. Seabirds and marine mammals are still starving to death. The authors of a 2018 study published in *Nature* concluded that the predicted speed and degree of warming will result in "probably pushing marine organisms and ecosystems to the limits of their resilience and even beyond, which could cause irreversible changes."

That word again. *Resilience*. What jellyfish are so good at. They've lived already through five mass extinctions, and we can expect them to survive what's coming, as other species struggle and diminish.

The slough is emptying, currents carrying its nutrients into the cove, the bay, the ocean, to the creatures great and small that form the web of life as we know it, and on around our blue globe. A kingfisher sounds his ratchety call as he swoops from one bare branch to another along this cherished map-point in our beautiful, mysterious, and threatened world.

FICTION

Rapini

Tara Ison

It is a cruciferous vegetable, which sounds like crucifixion, I know, like crucifix, the tortured crux of it all, the fix is in. But it is not that grim-destinied story, to me. That will not be my own tale, our own tale. It is just so greenly delicious, in the consuming, eaten raw or sautéed or steamed, its clustered tender buds and spiky splayed leaves, its crunchy stems. Blanched bright, it is the grassy bloom of fresh-minted bills, Irish eyes, the emerald of Victorian wallpaper gleaming with arsenic. Its mouthcrunch bodes promise. It rushes my heart to a supercharged beat, greens my blood alive. I could eat it every day, all day, but I know to be moderate, even with such a healthful thing. I know not to overdo. But it has been a long while, and I have been so good. I take a taste, a single small bite, then another, another, and then I am all acrunch, devouring, and

You said you would stop, he says. He stands there, bothered and bewildered, squeegee in hand. We agreed. You told me you could, that you would.

I will, I assure, swallowing the last of a fibrous stalk. I can. Really.

He ponders, debates needling me, shakes his head, but goes with trust, with hope, as he does. He decides on his devotion to me, as he does. He returns to decaling the once-upon-a-time-guestroom walls: bunnies, panda cubs, piglets. He loves a project.

He does not understand its addictive call, this salad's siren song. His tongue doesn't crave like mine the olive oil and garlic, the braised snap, the pungent flowering it grants an omelet or sandwich of roasted pork. He is

immune to its spell. An understanding and devoted man, he nevertheless does not feel the lure of its temptation, the tug of its promised vegetal bliss.

It's just a little, I call after him, heady with it. Just this one more time, once.

I sigh into another bitter bite. It is all promise.

*

You promised me, he says the next time I am discovered, spoon in hand. He grips a hex key, a rack of wooden prison bars. Now his eyes accuse. My sober judge.

I tried, I make my dry mouth say. I am thick with leafiness. I am reclined on the sofa, limpened and flushed, increasingly convex. Oh, I think, crib. Playpen. Provide for, keep her safe, yes, that is what he thinks he must do. IKEA fatherhood.

You keep telling me that. I don't think you're really trying.

This time last. Stopping.

I don't think you're really committed.

Lighten up, I mumble. Have some you too. Let your hair down, baby.

Yeah, I don't think so. He peers into the small bowl on the coffee table. Where are you even getting this?

The problem, I see, is that he doesn't appreciate its nutritive gifts. Calcium, potassium, iron, Vitamins A and C and K, how vital those things are to life. How my very veins swell with its goodness, how needed the sustaining infusion of it is.

Folic acid, I offer.

What? he says.

Prevents defects. I languidly rub my belly. Spoonful sugar. Like a B12 shot. All good.

You think this is good? That's the problem, how your thinking gets messed up with this junk.

She will be an unpenned child, I am thinking. No bars, no cage. No imprisoning walls for her. I will free her to roam the realm. That is how I will mother.

It's not your fault, I hear him say. I know it's a sickness. But you can do this, please. I know you can. If not for yourself, then for her.

Her, for her, I float, will float with her, hand in hand, always together. She

will be forever safe in the keeping of my tender care. I will nurse her with this glowing verdant blood of mine, my floaty uncastled princess girl.

Tell me, tell me you will try, he says. His face is grim, so very grim.

*

I tried. But I am a shaking leaf now, for all the trying, couch-splayed and trapped inside my burning bones. My sweat is acid green. I spit a sickly chartreuse, my nose leaks jade. My veins are leaking essence.

If you love me, I say to him.

He puts the pink-slicked paintbrush down, hurries to my side.

I love you, he says. You know I love you. But I love her, too. You can't do this. I can't watch this.

He must understand, it is what keeps me alive, us alive. And so it is for her as much as myself, for we are one breath one skin one weakbeating heart, she and I, and I cannot live without it, I need it and thus so does she, I need its bitterness in my blood, our shared blood.

You need help, he is saying. Please, let me help you.

Then help me, yes, I beg. Help us. If you love us, you will get it for us.

He is shredded by doubt. His eyes shine with mourning. I don't know how to do that, he says at last. I don't know what to do. Tell me.

And I understand at last. He needs to hear a story. An instructive, enabling tale of pining and enchantment, of a craving indulged by blinded love, of a strong man's unceasing devotion, no matter the cost.

So I tell him of the garden nearby with high encircling walls, that he must climb those walls and clamber down and there he will find the leafy richness I desire, flowering from the earth. I tell him about the Witch, the hag, crone, sorceress, who will be there, it is her garden, after all, she will be angry at his trespass and she will frighten him threaten him but he must be steadfast, speak to her, point to the abundance she has, beg and plead if he must, surely she will share when he explains the pining I suffer, the crave that plagues me, she must spare some for his dear beloved needful wife, he must persuade her, make her listen. And if she will not share she will sell, this Witch, he will have to pay, whatever the price or promise or sacrifice she demands of him he must pay it, promise it, sacrifice even his most beloved and precious thing, and bring the treasure home to me, to us, hurry, you must, for without it I shall surely die.

And he listens, grimly, nodding in despair, and then flees while I ache for the float and the flush, I am cold so cold, and I curl around her to keep her warm inside me, there is so little warmth left inside me, but I must share all I have, all I am, and then I hear him return, I knew he would return, bewitched by me as he is. He is back, helpless again, but I am too weak to do it, I wave he must do it, hurry, end this torture, get it to the crucial tortured heart of me, now. Fix me up.

I glimpse the tiny concave gleam of metal, sense the flicker heat of a small flame, feel the snapping grip on my arm and the slap slap on my tender-veined skin, then the bitter biting sting.

And there, my delicious liquid rush, my bloodstream glow. It is the gift I will pass to her, it is all I have to give, the sharing of this sweetest dream, riding the storybook waves with my golden heroine child, my own and only happily ever after.

POETRY

“Prince Edward Island” and “Newfoundland”

Joshua Mensch

Prince Edward Island

I lost whatever I buried in the sand.
Summer after summer we’d return
to find it altered. Only the signs
remained where they’d been planted.
The ridges of grass rose or sank
by the storms that pushed the bank,
the ice floes punished and scraped.
In town, the ice cream parlour remained
my favourite event. I still don’t know
how they made it, but if I tasted it again?
I have a way of ruining things.
Once, on the ferry over,
before they built the bridge,
my father poured soup from a thermos
and smiled as the other passengers looked on.
How cleverly he’d managed things.
The food on the ferry was bland.

The view was always the same.
I stood at the railing and watched
Prince Edward Island resolve
into a thick strip, with buildings and cars,
while behind us, Nova Scotia dissolved.
Being an unsteady child,
I often dropped things.
One time it was a camera.
No doubt the pictures it contained
were banal and largely out of focus,
the sea slanted at various angles,
glittering and pale. The antics
of my sister, my father grinning
with his wide moustache, a boy
with his eyes half closed.
Photos we'd look at once, while still
in the envelope, and then never again,
until many years later, perhaps
after our parents' deaths, sifting
through their lives and stopping
now and again to look and remark
the passage of time with regret.
Were those photos not lost
I would not remember them.
Had I seen them, I would not
regret their loss. This is the way:
Whatever I buried, whatever I dropped,
I kept somewhere.

Newfoundland

Shattered rocks, a broken coastline
rushing and receding, leaving pieces
of itself behind for birds to nest on,

and along the jagged cliffs, trees
blown horizontal along the ground.
Here battered coves offer harbour,
little solace, to sturdy wooden houses
and brightly coloured boats.
When it rained, rain roped the earth
into the sky's heavy net. Trees swam
within it. We arrived by ferry,
a giant catamaran with cars, buses, trucks.
Violent waves swayed us from our lunch.
I thought it was riveting. An old woman
vomited. A man said we might drown.
On land, I slept in a tent with an older woman
who was sleeping with a younger man.
I was like a child curled up next to her.
I heard them laughing one night
and then I heard my name. I made
for the trees, thought about running.
I was twelve and obvious in my thinking.
The woman felt bad for me.
The man made me sleep in the van.
Later, we hiked to the top of Gros Morne,
a steep incline that led to a flat summit
of sharp, wet rocks. When the fog came,
we huddled and waited for the sky to pass,
lost, suddenly, in each other's imaginations.
But isn't it always like that? A fog so deep
you can wave your hand and not even see it?
When it cleared, we saw the fjord below
like a fat snake between glacier-scraped tablelands.
The land had changed and seemed old,
though it was younger than we imagined.

MULTIMEDIA

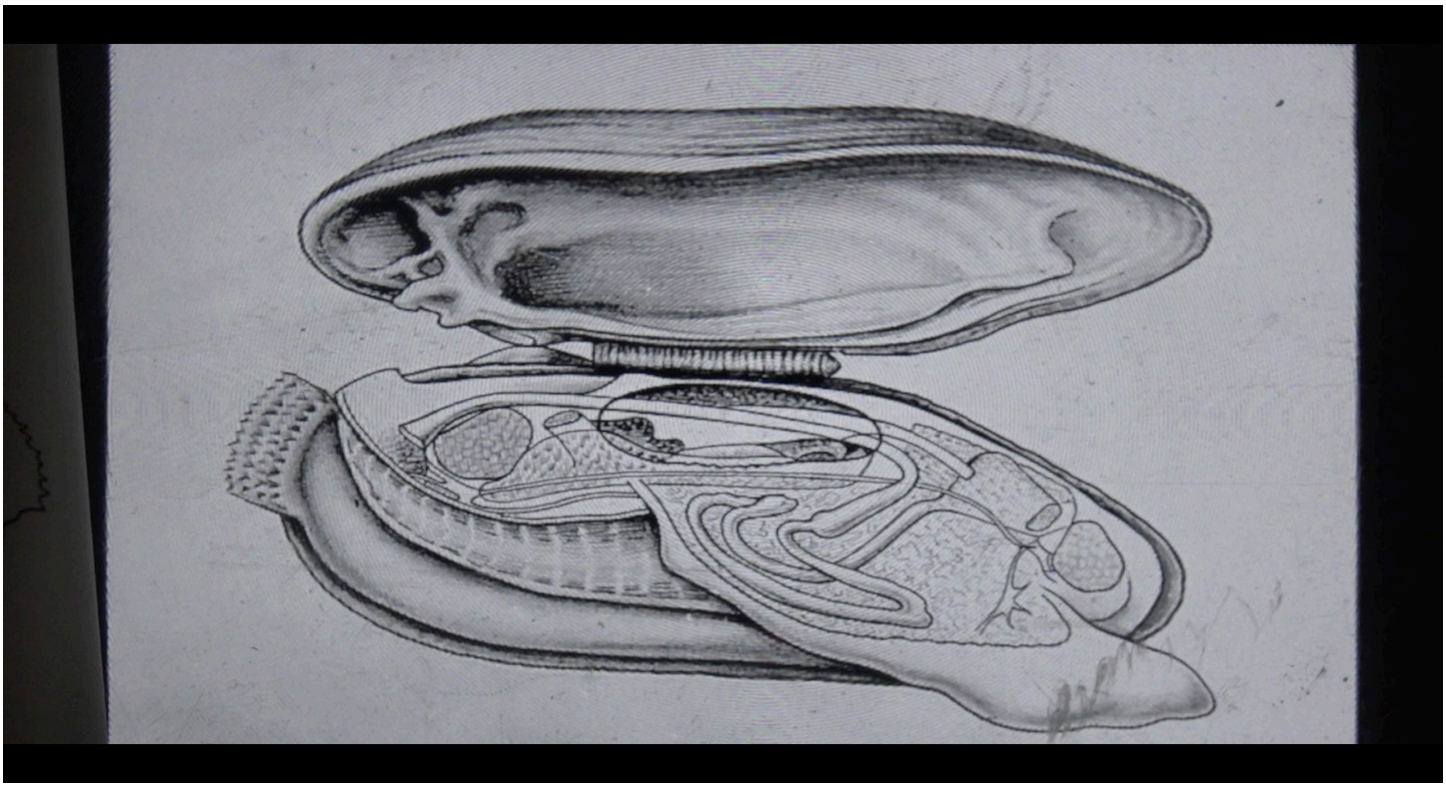
199-41 Clam (backwards)

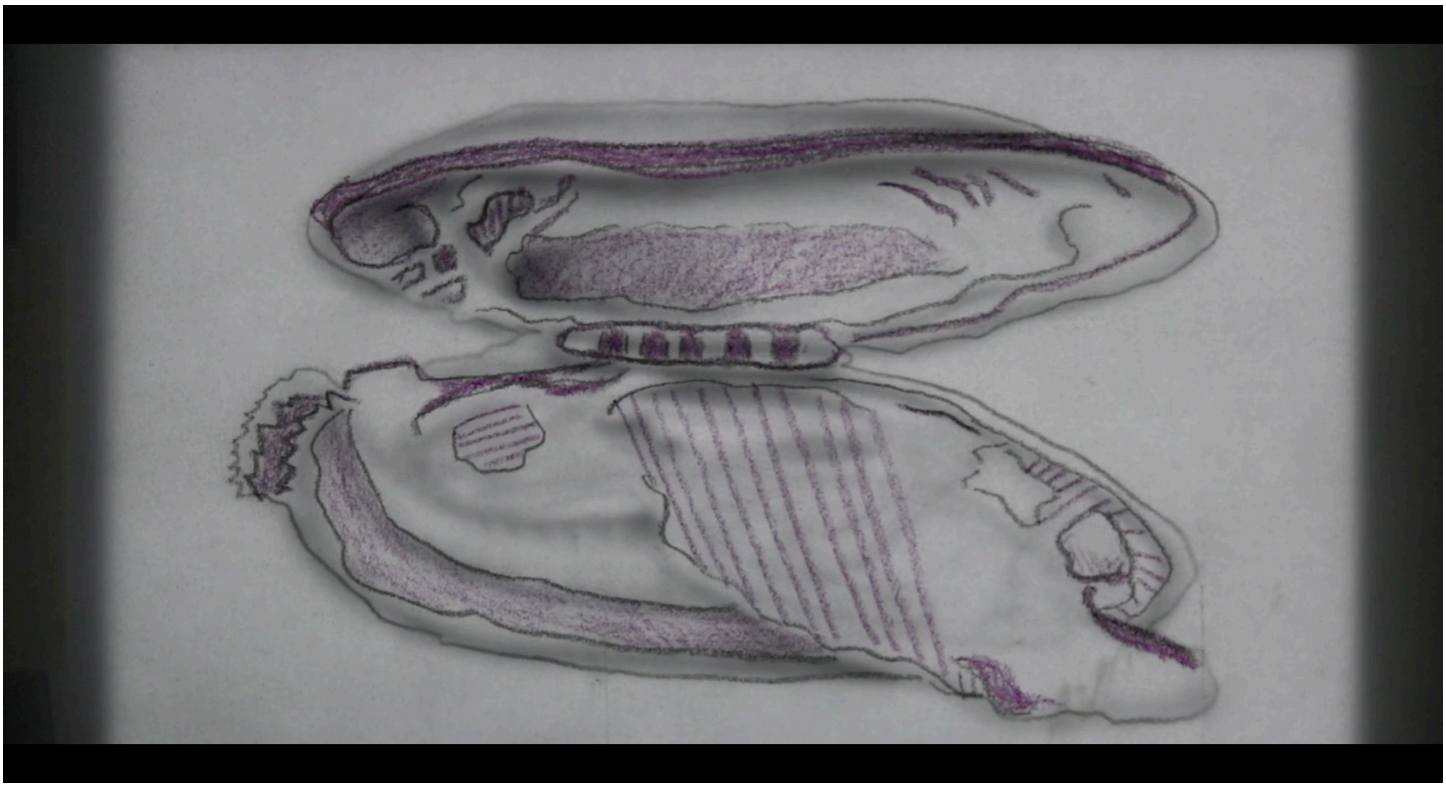
Kristen Gallagher

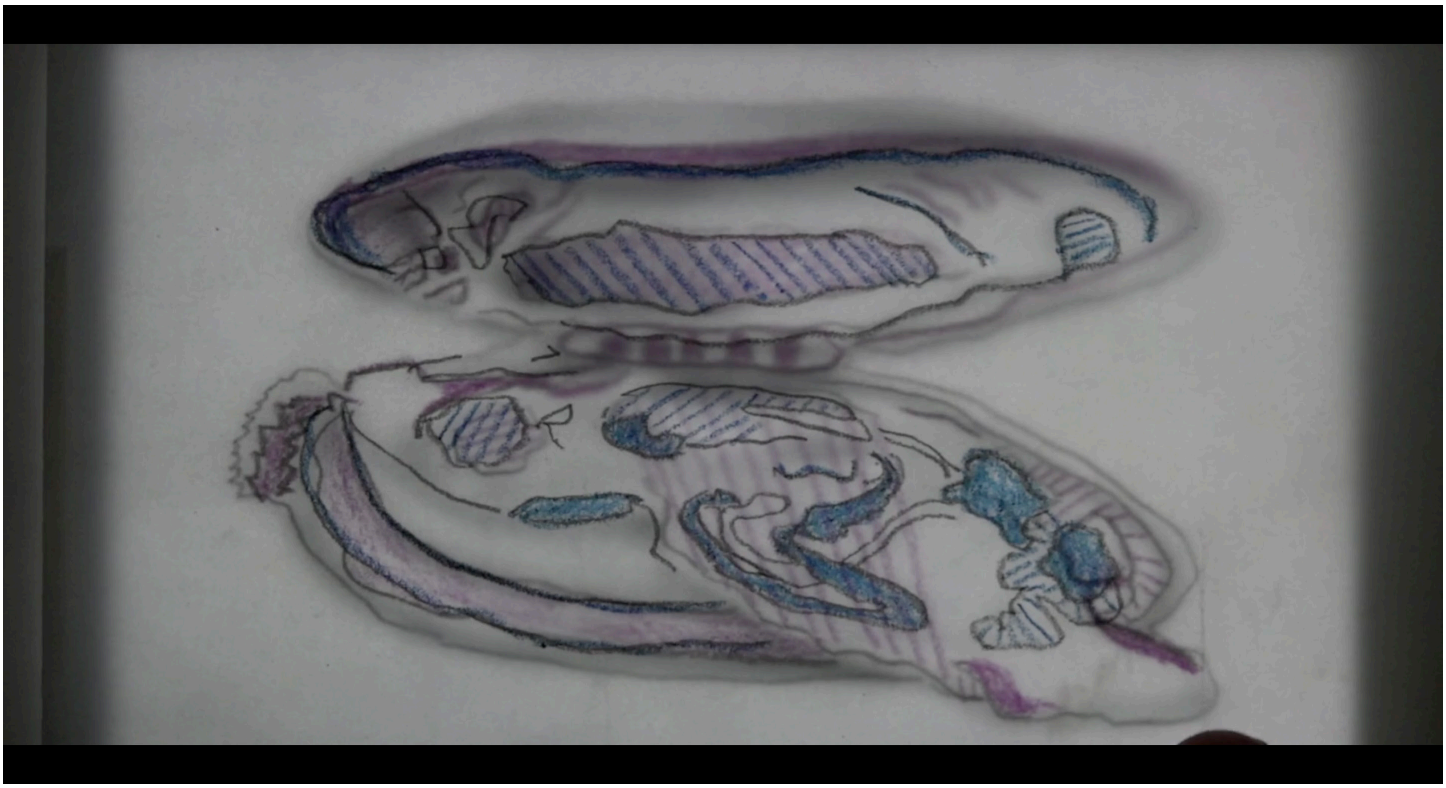
In early 2020, Kristen Gallagher and Tara Nelson began a collaboration concerned with mining the large, underexplored collection of lantern slides at the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, New York, where Nelson is an archive curator.

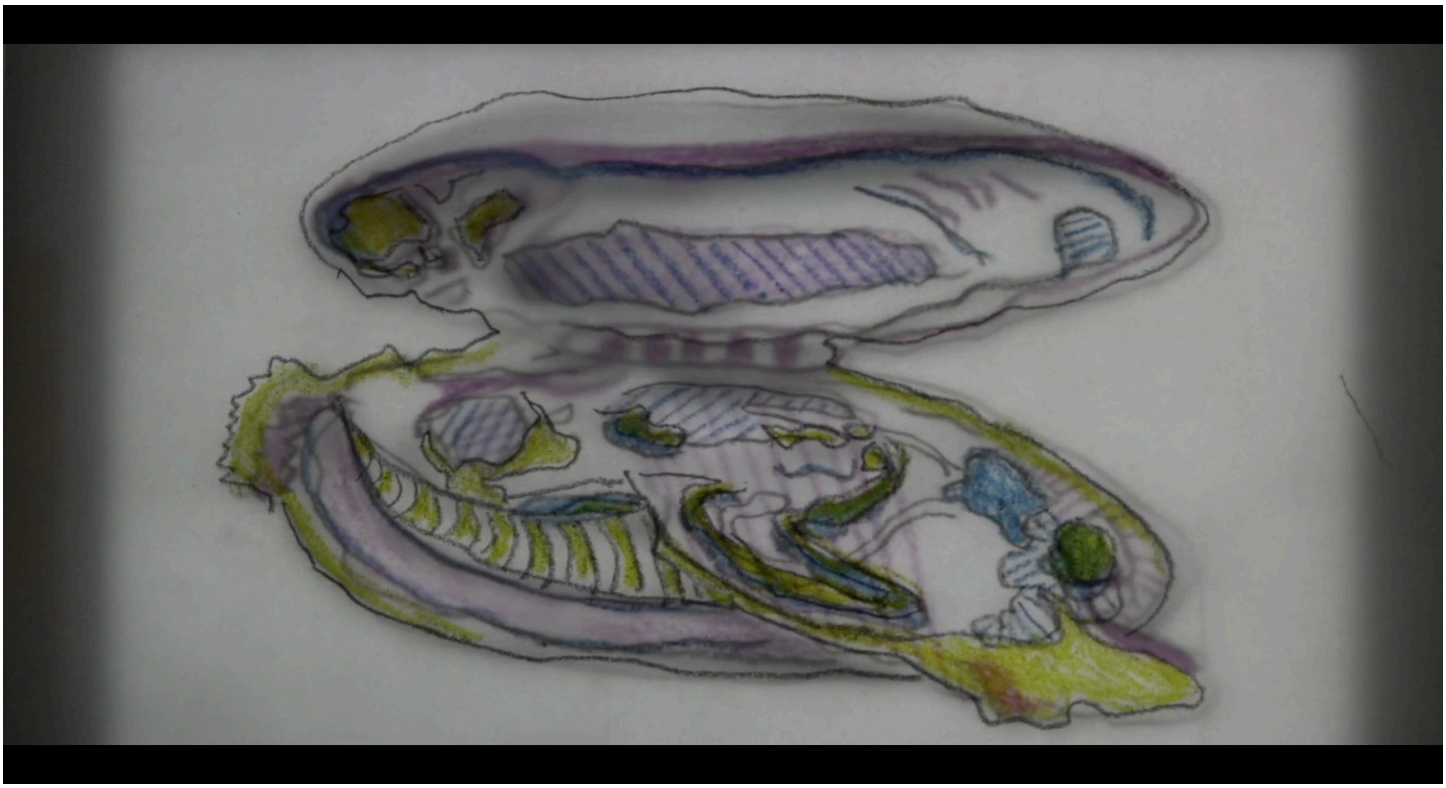
The process works like this: Each month, Nelson chooses a slide (sometimes because an image strikes her, sometimes in response to a chance-based guideline from Gallagher, such as "row 1, shelf 1, box 5, slide 20"). Once Nelson shares the image, Gallagher has two weeks to write a brief response and record herself performing it. Nelson then makes a short film featuring both the slide and Gallagher's soundtrack. It's all quick and dirty, against perfectionism. The intention is to continue the series until every slide in the collection has been included—a goal that neither artist will live long enough to accomplish.

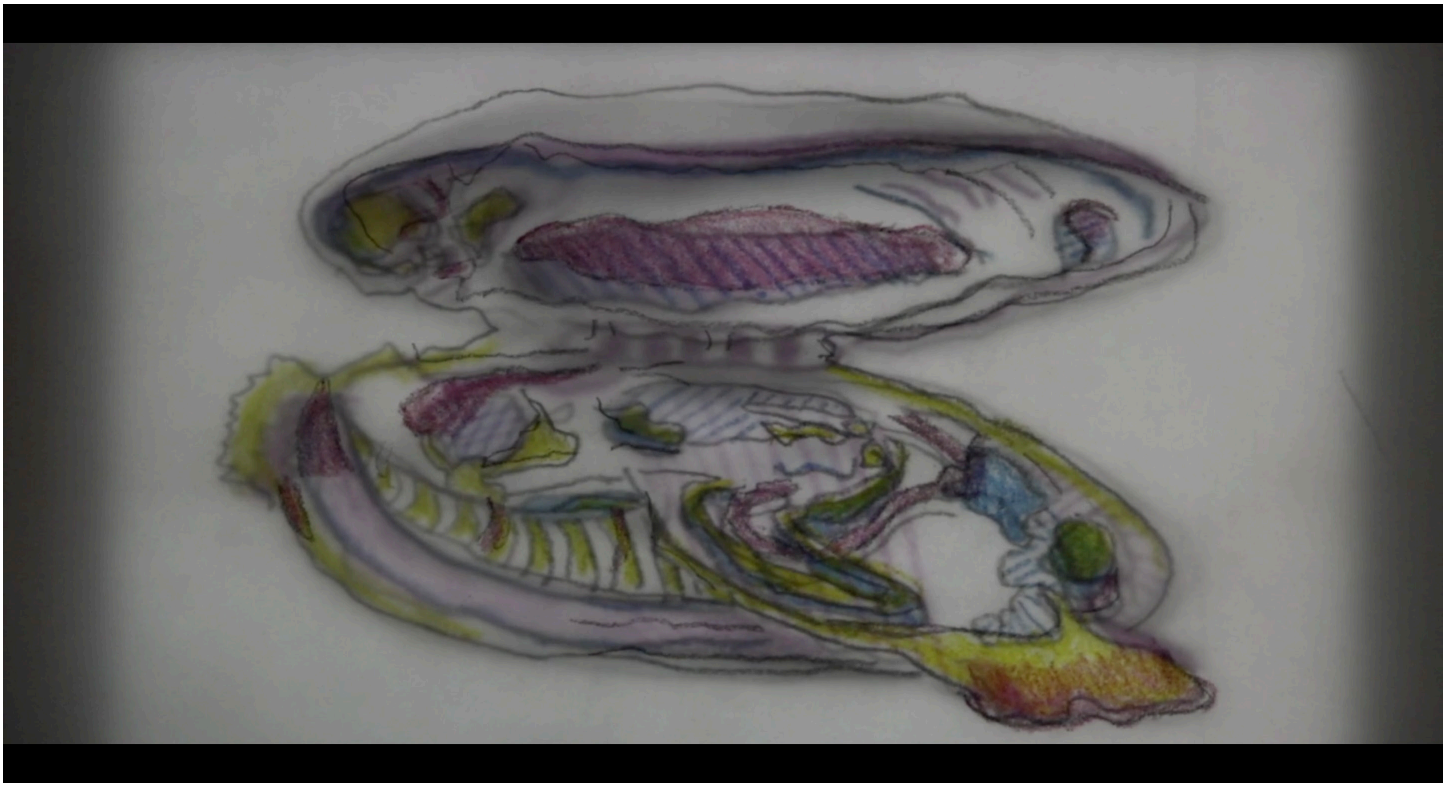
"199-41 Clam (backwards)" is the third slide in this collaborative series.

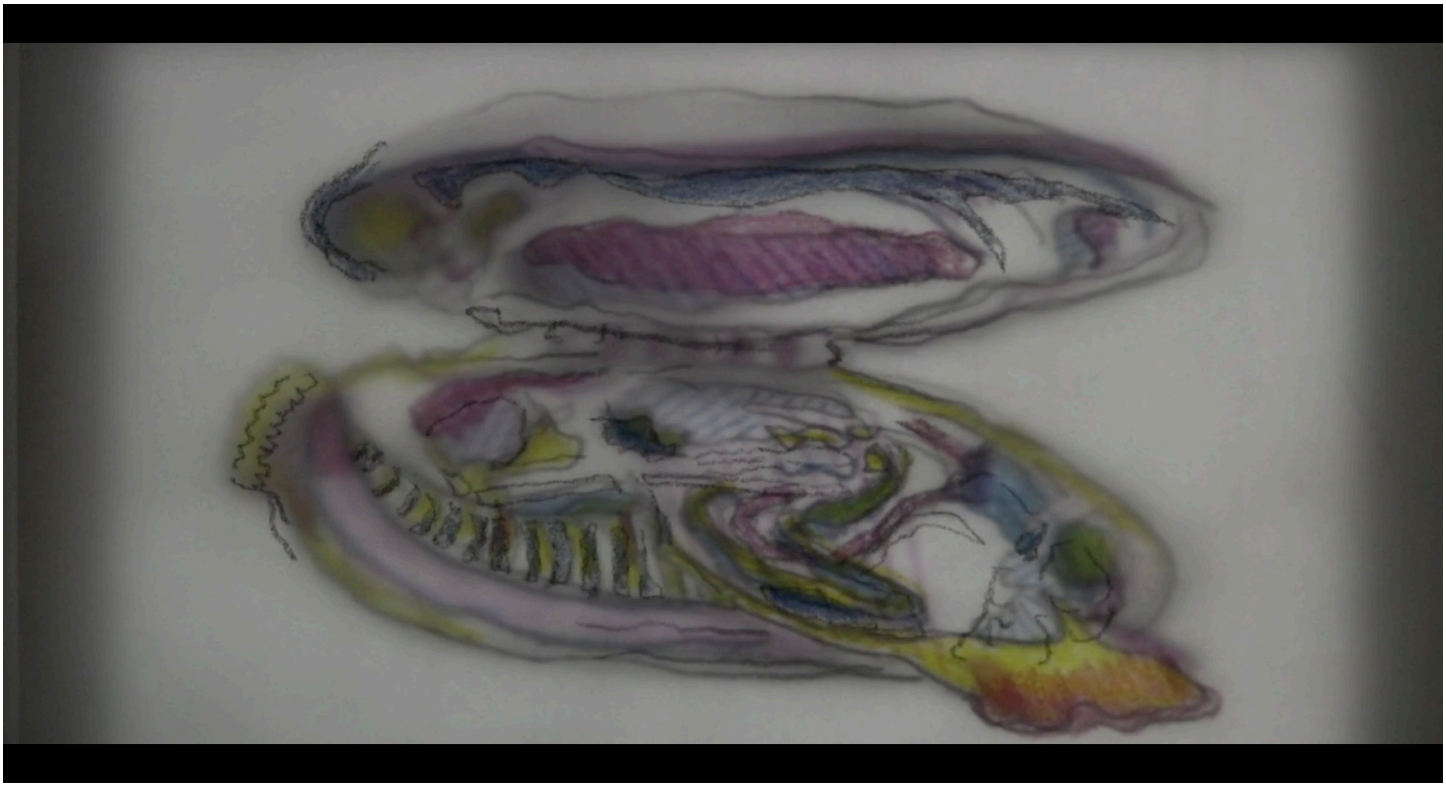


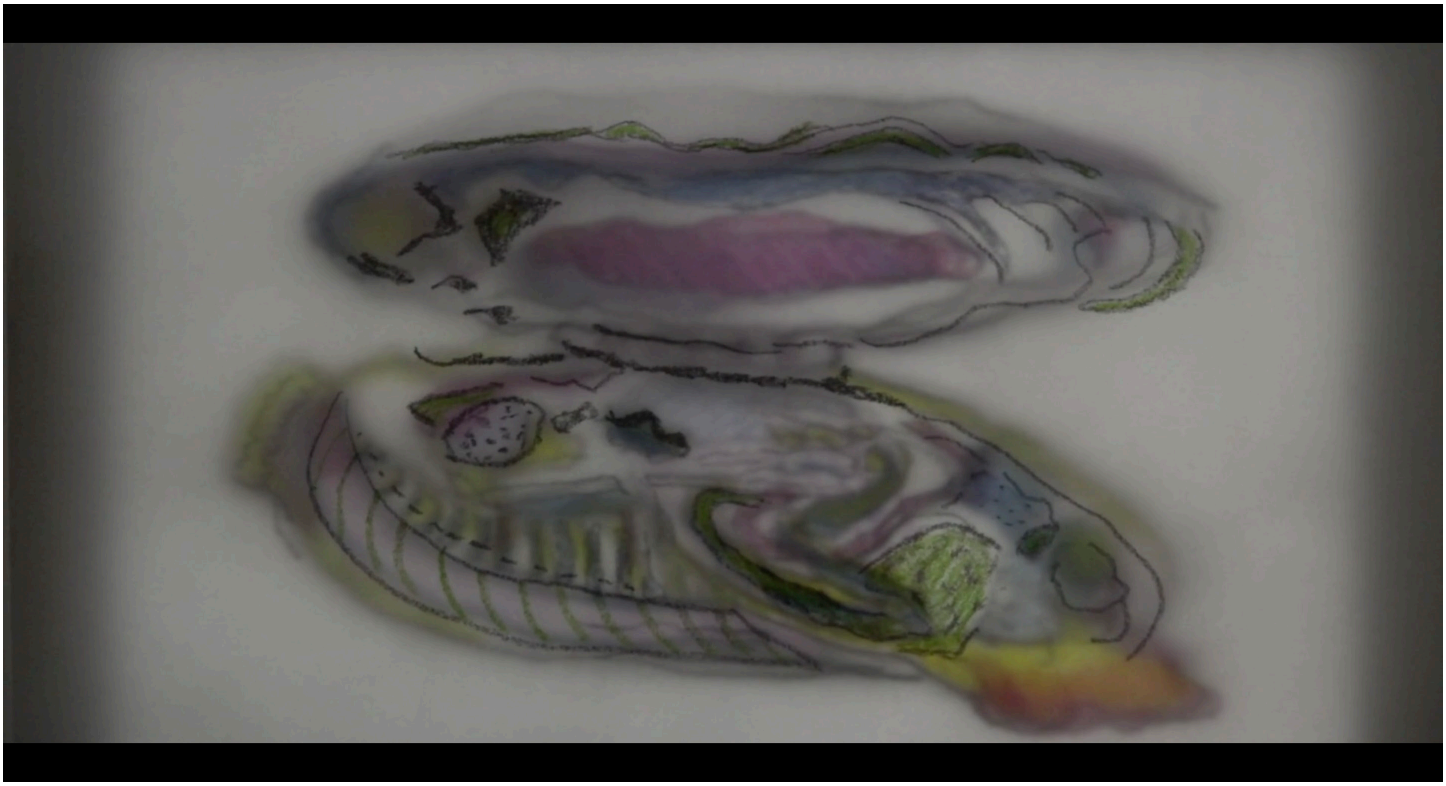












POETRY

“The Rings of Saturn,” “The Old Faith,” and “The Man in the Mirror”

David Biespiel

THE RINGS OF SATURN

A rare, bright, Sunday morning in January, no one
On the streets, an early seaside glare,
The kind of blue-lit morning you settle in
To read *The Rings of Saturn*, taking in
The bare-limb landscapes, the nothing layers
Crenellating slowly to the harbor, the ground
Going out from under you, and if you stand there
Long enough to sense the tide going out,
Folding back in the dolphin-wind of the half-
Dark water (like a bedsheet in a house
You woke in once as a child), you’ll sense the light
Shining out of itself. Or you sense the words
And pictures pulling you in, one gray
Scale at a time, with the coastline curves,
Meadows, and pastures, a perfect harvest

Behind the tree line. Then, a bridge,
Railway, something of an odd maritime
Cloud, and the feeling, intermittent, of
Reawakening into life, into a smoky
Rain—though you could walk out into
This cold light, with the banks of
Moss and trees, and not know where
To turn, or why, at this given moment,
You feel how little time remains.

THE OLD FAITH

Memory as raw as a weathered
Tooth, which, if it weren't
Smoothed, like carved stone
From water, we could feel it
As elegant as a waver. Or, loosened,
As frail flight, or like day lilies,
However flawed, gathering at the
Side of the road, bright-
Faced, spring-pointed, pastoral, still.
Or, as weeping-eyed Latin
Turned in the mouth: *Recordatio* or
Animus, un-drowned, into sunlight, or
Sadness, like a wing's blur that at any
Distance becomes a passing forget-the-
Moment's moment, like a harvest
At dusk, sky the color of doves,
White-crowned, common-collared,
Hitting the horizon at the high
Dust distance in the heart. If only
The fracture of that shadow could be
Imprinted, fine as powder, like a white
Tree, in winter, on a hill. If only

Everything forgotten blossomed again,
Took heart, looked alive, like a feeling
Or thought, buried within, to
Coil and echo into the future.

THE MAN IN THE MIRROR

Maybe it was December, and I was at
My brown desk for an hour writing
About debts and forgiveness, pen-to-
Paper brushstrokes like painting
A low-tide seascape on a plank of wood,
The hills gold as hay with long fences.
It was raining in the city, carving
Tongue-and-groove marks in the amicable
Ground. I'd get up, time and again, to
Find my way to the window where
The clouds left a white glow, and, quietly, I
could see my body in a kind of outline in the
Glass, staring at the sap-wood and bark
Dissolving, as if the pull of the earth
Was adjusting to the early dark.
There was nothing, on this side of the room,
To say between the reflection and me,
Though one of us was dying,
Turning into the next new
Sweetness you might find hung on
A clothes-line strung across the air.
I could see how slumped that line
Was, close to the ground.

ESSAYS/NONFICTION

How to Land

Gina Frangello

"In America we only have the present tense. I am in danger. You are in danger. The burning of a book arouses no sensation in me. I know it hurts to burn. There are flames of napalm in Catonsville, Maryland. I know it hurts to burn. The typewriter is overheated, my mouth is burning. I cannot touch you and this is the oppressor's language." –Adrienne Rich

I'm looking online for information about the plane that crashed in our yard on Saturday afternoon, but I can't find anything yet. Time moves slowly in the desert. Unexpectedly, I do find short, no-nonsense news reports about another plane crash in our same California town, even on our actual road, back in January 2020 on the exact date our family left the area to head home to Chicago after winter break. This was before the word "pandemic" was on anyone's tongue except in secretly recorded meetings. We never heard about that other crash, which seems surprising but isn't. There's a small airport just east of our house, and also a military base in nearby Twentynine Palms, which supplies its own steady stream of aircraft mishaps during training exercises, so for a place where you can go days without seeing another human being there are a surprising number of aviation incidents.

The six-passenger plane went down some 500 feet from our house, where to the best of my knowledge it still sits. Meanwhile, we're in our second or fourth or forty-eighth round of quarantining in Chicago.

"I'm going to call the airport Monday and see if we can keep it," my husband tells me jubilantly about the plane wreck in our yard. "It'd make a great guest room or writing office."

The temperature in the small towns near Joshua Tree National Park can reach 120 degrees in the summer, but my husband must have a plan for wiring the plane up to a swamp cooler—he's handy that way, though his handiness sometimes can't keep pace with his plans. He's an idea man, my husband; often I wake up to him bringing me a cup of coffee and already cranking out jokes like a string of SNL skits, presenting them to me rapid-fire while I sip, propped up on pillows, and laugh. Still, maybe the plane could be another junk sculpture on our five acres of land. The six passengers, including the pilot, escaped the wreck unscathed and were apparently walking around our yard when the authorities finally showed up along with what passes for media in the high desert.

We wouldn't have known anything about it if our neighbor hadn't called my husband while we were driving home from a medical appointment. My husband's side of the phone call sounded like something out of a movie where the audience is supposed to be worked into a froth of suspense; phrases like "Wait…*what*?" and "Oh my god!" and "Was anyone killed?" I suppose it's surprising I didn't feel more alarmed, start interrupting, ask what was going on. But it's November, America in early coup, and it seems everyone we know has either lost a parent to COVID or is in the middle of a divorce. We're heading home from a dermatology visit where my husband, recently diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis that can shorten life expectancy by ten or fifteen years, has had some subcutaneous lumps and a fast-growing mark on his face removed for biopsy; he holds the phone up to the non-bandaged cheek.

Chicago is on a "suggested" stay-at-home order, under curfew again, restaurants closing as the weather grows colder and the sky more perpetually gray. I haven't seen most of the people I know in the world in months and spend a lot of time lately saying previously unimaginable things like *Thank god my parents are already dead*. It takes a lot to throw most Americans these days, given how our lives have taken on a surreal *Hunger Games* meets *The Walking Dead* quality. A plane crash in the yard seems about right.

A couple days go by, and my husband hasn't called the airport, though for all we know the plane is still in the yard. Things disappear in the desert.

Things go unclaimed. The skeleton of a woman was found this weekend, too, though November isn't high season for finding bodies. Around August, the desert swallows people on the regular.

Our neighbor (my husband calls him "the desert Kramer") has been getting his share of excitement from our house these past few months. A plane downed in the yard is a big deal, sure, but in August he got to witness a well-organized robbery too.

"At first I thought you guys had just gotten into town," he told my husband when he called that time. "But then a white van came in from the other side of the road and I knew something was up." He went outside and the thieves, who had emptied our house of everything right down to the potbelly stove, waved at him on their way down the sandy driveway. He tried to catch the license plate and write it in the sand at his feet but he couldn't see in the dark. The van was white, with a handicapped plate, but when my husband and I flew out to California to assess the damage, we couldn't relay those details because our neighbor won't talk to the police, and we were in Chicago at the time of the robbery, so how would we know any of this?

Still, we filed a report for insurance purposes. A stocky middle-aged cop and his younger, fresh-faced partner came out to see the depressingly stove-less house, and we dutifully showed them the clichéd butane lighter we'd found on the bedroom floor. The robbers took most of my clothing right out of the closet, though they left behind a pair of ratty blue house slippers that belonged to my husband's ex-wife, whose handmade mosaic tiles still decorate the patio. I sometimes wear the slippers when I go to the bathroom at night to prevent being bitten by a scorpion or a black widow.

We sat in the living room acting polite while the cops walked around, the older one puffing his chest and telling stories about shootouts with tweakers. At our home in Chicago, *Defund the Police* and *Blue Lives Don't Exist* signs hang from our balcony, and I wondered how these desert cops would act toward us if we weren't white. Would the older one still be showing off—would the younger one be so eager to help? But those are rhetorical questions to which history has already provided the answers. Here in the desert, BLM signs on the house would be enough to invite vandalism, although we have been vandalized anyway.

When the plane crash in our yard finally makes the news, the article says: "Aviators say that any plane landing you can walk away from is a good landing." The wrecked plane has a wheel on its roof now, the doors smashed

open, but nobody is dead. Two hundred and sixty thousand Americans have died from COVID-19, while the other 12.7 million who have been diagnosed with the virus have had what, under this definition, would be deemed a good landing. In this case, that good landing can include radical lung damage, brain fog, PTSD and other mental illnesses, water on the heart, teeth falling out (?!?), and a potentially permanent loss of taste and smell, among other not-death calamities.

My husband, who fell ill in early March and couldn't obtain a COVID-19 test, isn't included in the 12.7 million count—even though he'd had every symptom including lack of smell. Before the onset of his illness in March, one of his favorite things to do was give me long massages—two hours, sometimes longer. He is a writer and professor, the keyboard a conduit to his income; he is a guitar player who was just starting to perform in Chicago before the lockdown hit. Now, some days he can barely carry a coffee mug upstairs. He sleeps with braces on his hands. His immune system is so "depressed" that his rheumatologist has him on levels of Vitamin D I'd have assumed toxic. Lately he's hard to rouse in the mornings—I've been making the coffee more often, setting it on the table on his side of the bed, waking him once, twice, sometimes four or five times before he can stop the undertow of sleep from dragging him back.

Like the six survivors of the plane crash, our lives have become a kind of aimless milling around looking for what went wrong, even though we are among the lucky ones.

*

How much did my hand-me-down sundresses, my husband's amps and keyboard and beat-up Mexican guitar, our potbelly stove, his toolkit, fetch when pawned? What is the cash value of memory, of nostalgia, stacked against the need to eat, to pay rent, to support a habit brought on by hopelessness? What is the worth of a butane lighter dropped like a calling card? Our desert house is modest—ramshackle, even—but we put a new roof on it a few years back and only weeks before the break-in had new windows installed. New windows used to be a regular thing, a thing a person could buy without shame, but nothing that doesn't keep us alive now qualifies as a necessity.

My husband and I, both academics, work from home; our fourteen-year-

old and both of my college-aged daughters are in virtual school full-time; we are not essential workers. Our washing machine breaks and we replace it. Our downstairs tenants are denied their small business loan and have no income—they sustained themselves over spring and summer with an "empanada bicycle," then had to move into the building that houses their bar, all hands on deck to save the business. We get new tenants: an engaged couple who ask if they can stain the kitchen cabinets and paint the walls and replace the vintage light fixtures my parents brought from the house where I grew up when they moved into that apartment in 1999, shortly after my ex-husband and I bought this house. Now we have rent money again, and after the refrigerator breaks, my husband manages to fix it, fucked up hands and all.

When the pandemic first started raging, my youngest child and I were on an HMO that allowed us only to be seen at one beleaguered medical center in the entire county, but in the early days of lockdown, my husband and I had a Zoom wedding and now all the kids and I are on his good insurance and suddenly "worthy" of treatment anywhere we choose.

Ours has been a good landing in a country torn apart. How much is anyone entitled to want?

*

"Does he love us?" my youngest, who is fourteen, asks of our cat, who is sick. We have three cats (three children, three cats), the other two growing fatter as the sick one becomes more emaciated. He throws up on sofas, on manuscripts, on the banner one of my daughters made for my new business, on throw rugs, on beds … but he can still leap on the counter in a single bound and purrs gleefully when we pet him. Often, he sits outside the cabinet where we keep the cat treats, waiting in a kind of anticipatory hope that is synonymous with being alive. We can't go to our desert house anymore unless my daughters are home in Chicago, because we couldn't ask anyone to cat-sit. I know some families would have already put this cat to sleep, but as long as he is purring and jumping, euthanasia isn't on our menu options.

So here we are, landlocked in Chicago. Perhaps our sick cat is saving us from ourselves. I can understand why my youngest wants to believe that, at the very least, this high-maintenance pet loves us, but I don't really have a

clue if that's true or if any warm body who jiggled the treat container would suffice. I don't even know if the warm body part is a secondary concern now, as kidney disease leads the cat to unquenchable hunger and thirst. It can be argued that illness sharpens one's priorities, boils life down to the essentials, and while we know loneliness is dangerous to humans and animals, nobody to my knowledge has proven that deeply *individualized* love ranks higher on the chain of needs than basic companionship. Maybe only humans make such distinctions, as I did when I left my marriage for a once-in-a-lifetime passion. Should a cat be *required* to love us in order for us to minister to his shit and puke—or to shell out money for special food? I want to say of course not, that love given unconditionally, without a promise of gratitude and reciprocity, is the only kind of love worth much in the end, but maybe it's more complicated than that. I'm not sure it's love, only, that keeps us from putting down our sickly cat, or if it's also obligation and the fear of euthanizing a living thing for being inconvenient. I am not certain I can tell the difference between loving my cat unconditionally and my desire to be a person who *would*. When you've cheated on a spouse, left a marriage and blown everyone's lives apart, a track record of "bailing" follows you everywhere.

Parfois un chat n'est pas seulement un chat.

Whatever the reason, I promise my youngest simply, "Yes, of course he loves us."

*

I used to be afraid of flying. But sometime in 2016, after I had left my husband of twenty-three years, after my father who lived in our home had died, after I was diagnosed with breast cancer, after my ex-husband promised me he would be "an ally" and then blocked me on his phone and started filing motions for majority custody of our children and partition actions on our jointly owned properties, after my bilateral mastectomy and chemotherapy and hospitalization for neutropenia and developing lymphedema in my left arm and bone-on-bone osteoarthritis in my left hip, after the man who is now my husband but was then still living with his ex-wife began talking about how he wished he'd died during his 2008 relapse before he could "cause everyone so much pain," I started noticing that I no longer needed to pop a Lorazepam before getting on a plane. For the first time in my life,

I could sleep right through turbulence that would once have terrified me so much I'd been known to clutch the hands of strangers seated next to me. It wasn't that I *wanted* the plane to go down—I had three children for whom I'd fought my cancer in the most aggressive manner possible so I could stick around. It was more that I was exhausted. Or maybe I had no fucks left to give.

Even now—although the chemo has ended and my breasts are reconstructed and beautifully tattooed and I've had a hip replacement and my lymphedema is under control; although I am remarried and my children are healthy; although I am on the brink of my five-year anniversary of being cancer-free, or whatever the hell they allow us to call ourselves instead of *cured* because *cured* is a misnomer and once you've had cancer it can always be dormant inside you—when a plane is bouncing up and down, it's still like I'm looking at my former self from the other side of a transparent veil and wondering what that woman was so worked up about. Sometimes, I am ashamed of the mild, everyday things that used to scare her, just as I envy how much she used to care about…*everything*.

Sometimes, no matter what I have to look forward to, no matter how much I love, I wonder if it is maybe too late for me to have a good landing.

*

When we went to the desert to put our recently robbed house together—back in August that still felt like March had never ended—we had one socially distanced dinner in the yard of the lead singer of my husband's longtime California band. The singer and his wife live in the desert full-time, on a private road with an in-ground pool and small guest house. To get to their place, you have to drive on dirt roads so bumpy it's like navigating the surface of the moon. This kind of isolation would once have seemed like a nightmare to me, but now I'm envious.

In their pretty yard, we watched the bats swoop toward the pool, small flapping flashes of darkness against the desert sky, and I thought of a trip to Kenya I took with my ex-husband and our children and my ex's father almost exactly a decade ago. We stayed at an isolated little hotel called Diamond Beach, and everyone would converge at the hotel bar in the evenings and drink rum and gingers and watch screenings of films while bats flocked underneath the thatched roof covering the bar.

Now, every time I see a bat, I think of Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate*; I think of my former father-in-law who had just lost his wife to breast cancer and cirrhosis; I think of a fight my ex and I had in front of that bar by daylight and how he stormed away; I think of the mosquitoes that feasted on our daughters until we couldn't count the individual bites, which had become one central mass of red and inflamed skin; I think of having to convince one of the girls to take her malaria pills and a buffet breakfast in front of staff and other guests when we forced the pill into her mouth and how she bucked and some of the orange of the pill leaked from her lips but my ex-husband and I got it down; I think of William Carlos Williams's "The Use of Force," which I teach in workshops; I think of my current husband, who also used "The Use of Force" in his workshops long before we met; I think of the way my current husband first confessed his love for me in an email while I was in Kenya with my then-nuclear family, though we were still over a year away from beginning our affair; I think of the bat that once got into my college apartment and the way my roommate and I covered our friend Tom from head to toe in random women's clothing before pushing him into the bedroom to get rid of it; I think of our desert home in California with my husband's ex-wife's mosaic tile on the patio, which is on a road with the same name as my final apartment in Madison, Wisconsin, before I had met either my ex-husband or current husband; I think of how, when you are fifty-two years old, there is no association that doesn't beget another and time stops running in a linear fashion (if it ever did) and becomes so associative, so circular, so endlessly looping that suddenly I am on a walking path again at a safari lodge in Kenya on Christmas Day 2010 and one of my daughters is shouting that I should divorce her father, and it's impossible to say, anymore, whether the reason is that we seemed so goddamned unhappy that our divorce was already a foregone conclusion, or whether it meant nothing at all, the way children may yell *I hate you* during a fight and want to snuggle ten minutes later. I think of how the present is incapable of shedding light on the past because the present imbues the past with meaning that seems inevitable, or pre-ordained, when it is not.

We sat around my husband's bandmate's yard, chairs spread as widely as was practical, eating the home cooked vegetarian meal he and his wife had prepared, three of us drinking wine and my husband sipping seltzer water, as occasional stars shot across the sky the way they do in the desert, and all my various selves worked to arrange and fold neatly together like puzzle

pieces in that desert yard and failed.

A desert rat scurried along the low stone wall, and if this happened in Chicago, I would probably scream, but somehow in the desert it didn't faze me, and I swirled my wine.

"You should have seen this place last month," my husband's bandmate told us. "All the rabbits were dying. We couldn't go on a hike without seeing dead rabbits everywhere."

This seemed inexplicable—something that "just happens" in the desert. "Rabbit" is another complicated word in a bubbling cauldron of complicated words: dead rabbits littering Joshua Tree National Park like frogs from the sky or a plague of locusts, none of which would surprise anyone anymore. Rabbits sautéed and garlicy on La Gomera, at the fancy cliffside hotel where my ex-husband and I stayed before we had children, where we dressed for dinner and congregated with the other guests in the small old-world bar, sipping cognac until they let us in to feed. Baby rabbits that my youngest child once watched a peer step on and kill in a suburban backyard many years ago. Baby bunnies, too, in our backyard in Chicago; we watched them hop tentatively around the garden in the early stages of pandemic summer, when it seemed gardening, like banana bread and home art projects, might sustain us. At night, the rabbits ate the vegetables we planted, or maybe it was the rats that ate them, but the pleasure we got from watching baby bunnies was worth the price of vegetables we didn't need.

An epidemic of dead rabbits does not rank high on the list of Strange Desert things—still, I learn later, when I google the plane crash and go down that rabbit hole (yes, this association too), that in the summer of 2020, rabbit hemorrhagic disease type 2 was raging so intensely in the Joshua Tree and Yucca Valley area that it spread even to pet rabbits kept indoors. The virus "has been shown to live in the environment for several months without a host body" and is "capable of wiping out huge swaths of wild and pet rabbits." Only because rabbits breed "like rabbits" (sorry) are they capable of surviving. They breed, it seems, faster than the disease can kill them.

Rabbits: In addition to every other association, they will now remind me of deadly viruses. They were living a parallel pandemic as we lived ours. Nature is not above pettiness. It will stop at nothing to remind us that humanity is nothing special.

*

Before my five-year cancer anniversary, before my husband's rheumatoid arthritis or biopsies, before a writer I admire killed herself in the pandemic leaving two young children, before a plane crashed in our yard and the six survivors stumbled out miraculously alive, before the burgled house, before my twin daughters went back to Los Angeles and were living with us and changing hair colors every few weeks and learning how to operate a tattoo gun, back when it was still warm outside and friends could visit one another and people were still semi-excited about finding pretty masks online and some of us were still forgetting not to put on lipstick before going out, my husband texted to tell me one of the baby bunnies was dying in our yard.

When I went outside, our next door neighbors were in their yard, too, and we talked back and forth over the fence for a while about how the bunny had been wandering around in their yard the night before, looking sick, and they had tried to find its mother and siblings to no avail. My husband had an antique china saucer with milk in it, trying to get the bunny to drink. But the bunny was on its side with half-mast eyes, the quick rise and fall of its breath taking all its energy. We recognized this baby bunny—one of two we saw—but now it seemed a good deal smaller than I remembered, and its fur was matted and its eyes already partly filmed over, and there was no telling ourselves that survival was a plausible outcome.

Soon, the neighbors went about their business, and the sun began lowering in the sky, but my husband and I sat in the grass in the backyard of a home I had purchased with another man, a backyard where my parents once sat laughing over barbecues while the children played in plastic kiddie pools, but it was *ours* now: our eggplants and giant zucchinis and too many lemon cucumbers and the inflatable hot tub my children had bought me for Mother's Day. My parents' ashes were scattered all around the garden, including the area where the bunny lay dying.

We talked about whether we should euthanize this bunny, but we couldn't bring ourselves to do it, just as we cannot bring ourselves to put our cat to sleep. We stroked the dying bunny tentatively, in an effort to comfort it, and we whispered words that were clearly for our own benefit, like "We've got you," and "You're okay." The bunny wouldn't have understood them even if it had been healthy enough to bound away, just like my father was too far gone to understand such words when I spoke them to him on his deathbed. Maybe it is impossible to comfort the dying, and we are only ever comfort-

ing ourselves, or maybe that has become the pretty story we will tell ourselves about a pandemic in which countless families have been kept from the deathbeds of their beloveds.

I stroked the bunny between its eyes the way I used to do for my children and, like my children, the bunny's eyes began to droop into sleep, and indeed I did feel comforted—even though there were still children in cages at the border and all over the country the police were making clear that not only did Black lives not matter but that military vets and teenage girls with whom my daughters had gone to high school were fair game for their brutality as well. Somehow, the sight of the dying bunny's sleep-shut eyes allowed me to believe, just for a moment, that everything was going to be okay. My husband and I leaned into each other in the garden, crouched over the bunny until the sun set, and when I removed my finger from between the bunny's eyes it did not rouse, and we went inside believing it would have a peaceful death and saying we would bury it in the morning.

*

Let me be clear: There is nothing okay about this world. For decades scientists have warned of an environmental point of no return. But what nobody ever talked about, really, was the psychological point of no return. How do we go back to normal? What does that even mean? How will we ever breathe each other's air again without fear? How will humanity make up for its lack of touch, for the feral things we became in isolation? How will one word ever not carry a thousand meanings, circling back to the people we used to be and fracturing our fragile attempts to exist in the now, even as maybe, *probably*, biopsies come back clean and arthritis medications bring the ruined hands I love—my husband's hands—back to my body.

But the morning after we left our bunny, presuming it would die peacefully, we found it in another area of the garden altogether, though it must have been dragged there by another animal as it could not have gotten up on its own steam. It was still alive. Parts of its fur were missing, the skin red and raw. Perhaps we should have chopped its head off fast and clean the night before, but hindsight has never saved anyone from anything. The bunny died without its mother, in the morning sunlight with only us to bear witness, and we buried it in the dirt alongside my parents' charred remains and marked its presence with a large stone that—when lifted—swarmed with

scurrying ants busily carrying on their missions, still striving, still alive.

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Hunting The Brown Buffalo

Jorge Campos Aguiñiga

That my brother-in-law Oscar "Zeta" Acosta and Hunter S. Thompson found each other was no coincidence—they had so much in common. In fact, they could have been twin brothers from different fathers. Both were driven by a lifelong obsession to repay society for their rejection as young men. Hunter was shunned by the wealthy in Kentucky; Oscar by the legal profession and eventually the Chicano community. Hunter emulated F. Scott Fitzgerald and thought of himself as Gatsby. Oscar imagined himself a revolutionary and playboy, but obsessed about his obesity, as he acknowledged in *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* and *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*.

Although Oscar fantasized about becoming the Chicano Clarence Darrow, he was a mediocre legal thinker and did not have the necessary discipline. Few people know that during his rise as advocate for the Chicano movement, he had a number of prominent attorneys ghost-write his legal briefs. They were happy to lend their talents to a cause in which they believed, without having to put their names on documents that might compromise their private practices. From a distance, they could take vicarious pleasure watching Oscar tell judges to get fucked, and the notoriety he gained giving the finger to opposition lawyers.

Both were masters of exaggeration and self-indulgence. Hunter got close to the Hells Angels and, much to their chagrin, told people he was an official member; Oscar surrounded himself with vatos locos, but they never considered him a member of their gangs. Like Hunter Thompson, Oscar

sent for the same mail-order doctorate in ministry certificate so he could be addressed as "Doctor Gonzo."

Both were insomniacs and preferred the shadows of night to write or party, or both. They emulated each other and created a symbiotic relationship that fed off their mutually destructive tendencies. They may have been brilliant writers, but their work came at the expense of the audience. Obsessed with being the center of attention, they created drug-induced drama deliberately, anywhere they went. Both were cruel to their friends and loved ones and showed only occasional flashes of generosity. Neither was known to say I'm sorry or to admit to mistakes.

Oscar would rent or lease cars with an initial cash deposit, then abandon them when the heat got too close. Because he had no credit cards and collected no salary, there was nothing creditors could garnish. At one point, he gave my sister a Shelby Cobra for her birthday, then simply moved his residence when the repossession order came. Since they never seemed to have any money, Oscar lived, like Hunter, off the generosity of his admirers and benefactors. To the many who got burned, both seemed like sociopaths.

The Chicano movement gave Oscar the opportunity to find the notoriety he so desperately sought. But when he first arrived in East Los Angeles, no one knew who he was. My sister Socorro was a paralegal and well connected with prominent attorneys and community organizers. She introduced Oscar to the leaders of the Chicano movement, including the Brown Berets, who later became his bodyguards. Oscar immediately latched on to Socorro and became obsessed with her.

It was then that he adopted the fuck-the-motherfucking world attitude and became a drug-crazed vato loco. As part of his new nom de guerre, he added "Zeta" as a middle name to mimic Hunter's "S." Years later, Hunter would return the favor and mimic Oscar by running for sheriff in Colorado, as Oscar had done in Los Angeles.

Oscar took on the defense of the "Chicano 13" following the East Los Angeles high school walkouts in 1968 because no one else in the legal community would touch the case. Perhaps by dark coincidence, the Manson trial was taking place at the same court building as the Chicano 13 hearings. It was not long before Oscar was drawn to the Manson women and, to my sister's distress, would vanish for days into the canyons with the Manson clan.

Such disappearances were not uncommon. During one of their many break-ups, Oscar went missing for several weeks, then called my sister to

rescue him. She got in touch with me at the San Francisco law firm where I was clerking and begged me to accompany her. We found him in a sleazy shooting gallery in the Mission, binging on drugs. We dragged him into the backseat of the car almost unconscious. Noticing the needle tracks on his arms, my sister asked what he'd been doing. He told us he had been shooting "speed balls," a potentially lethal combination of heroin and cocaine.

I met Hunter a few times at my sister's house in Mount Washington when he and Oscar were working on Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas, and again when Oscar wrote his books. When Oscar and Hunter worked together, my sister meticulously typed the manuscripts on the IBM Selectric typewriters they both favored. As Oscar's live-in paralegal, she also did his legal research and helped prepare and type his briefs and motions. Oscar always claimed Hunter stole his best ideas and vice versa.

If the writing went well, Hunter and Oscar worshipped the typewriters—like pagan goddesses. If not, there was hell to pay. Typewriters were thrown through windows, stomped, or battered into pieces. Periodically, one had to be sacrificed to appease the great writer in the sky. Such an event would be approached with a great deal of ceremony and preparation, sometimes in a wild drug bacchanalia in which everyone was invited to participate. It culminated with an explosion or a firing squad. Perhaps that's why both kept such variety, as with women. Like Hunter, Oscar believed he had the right to sleep with anyone, but went into a rage if "his" woman even appeared to flirt. That was the source of the violence that characterized his relationship with my sister. She adored Oscar, no matter the transgression.

In *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*, Oscar dates the book "Ziquitaro, Michoacan, Mexico—May, 1972," citing the rustic village at the base of beautiful rolling hills where my sister and I were born. On the last page of *The Revolt Of The Cockroach People*, he writes: *"When the Brown Buffalo left LA and headed for Frisco Bay in the Spring of '72, he had no way of knowing that the Feds from the Treasury would be waiting for him to cross the border. He did not know that he'd meet up with Jesus again, either. Or that he'd go on to Ziquitaro and marry a Tarascan princess...."*

That Tarascan princess was my sister Socorro.

My sister and Oscar were married three times and twice divorced. The first time he followed Socorro to Mexico City, where our parents had sent her to get her away from him. Oscar saw himself as a liberator of women, not because he believed they should make their own choices but because

he wanted to possess them all. He followed my sister to Mexico City and took her to Acapulco, where they married in secret. This did not sit well with our family, but we accepted my sister's decision and tried to live with the marriage as best we could.

The second time, which both called their "official church wedding," my sister and Oscar were married at the Church of the Epiphany in Lincoln Heights. At their insistence, we all wore traditional Mexican outfits, and the ceremony was performed by a local priest active in the Chicano community. The Brown Berets served as ushers, and I gave my sister away because our parents refused to participate.

For me, any hope of a good relationship with Oscar changed the day my sister called and asked me to get to her place as quickly as possible. I raced to their apartment in Silverlake. Oscar had beaten her so badly that her face was swollen. Furniture was strewn across the floor, and a closet door was hanging from one hinge. Her neck was marked by a purplish ring of bruises where he had choked her.

"I thought he was going to kill me," she sobbed, but still refused to call the police because she feared Oscar's arrest would jeopardize the pending Chicano 13 trial.

At that time, I was licensed to carry and had a .38 Police Special, which had been given to me as a birthday present by a Compton police sergeant. Since my sister refused to call the police, I told her I would stay until we found a safe place for her to go. I also told her that if Oscar showed up at the apartment, I would shoot the son-of-a-bitch. Oscar could be a bully, but he had a gang mentality. He was at his best with a mob of thugs.

Halfway through a mutually desired pregnancy, Socorro suffered a miscarriage. The attending physician thought it was a consequence of Oscar's use of drugs. At Oscar's insistence, the fetus was placed in a jar filled with tequila and displayed in their home on the mantle above the fireplace.

Oscar also painted a monolith on a large canvas, meant to depict the lost child as an Aztec god. I hated the painting, but it always found its way to the living room in every place they lived.

Oscar prevailed upon my sister to take him to Ziquitaro so they could be married for a third and final time. To the east stands a mythical mountain that towers over the village in the form of a metate, a three-legged implement made from volcanic rock. Along an oak-covered ridge that extends out of the mountain overlooking the expansive valley below, my great-grand-

father built the first hacienda in the area. Thus, our name is tied to the village since its foundation. The Campos family has been respected for generations for leading the struggle that restored the campesinos' land and dignity at the turn of the century. Father Hidalgo, the Catholic priest who led the revolution of independence against Spain in 1820, rested his forces in the village, and Ziquitaro became a refuge for rebel troops during the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

My sister took Oscar to the ancient family hacienda and, in a drug-fueled frenzy, he had his epiphany. To celebrate the occasion, he painted graffiti on the walls of our ancestral home. When our relatives discovered the desecration, they gave Oscar twenty-four hours to leave the village. Oscar wrote and embellished the moment, but my sister lived in shame afterward and never returned to the village.

By the early 1970s, Oscar had grown weary. He looked south at the growing guerrilla movements in Latin America and decided—he would run guns to Mexico and exchange them for drugs to be sold back in the U.S. Oscar's venture took him to Mazatlan in 1974. He called my sister to say he had pulled off the deal with local narcos and secured passage on a boat to Long Beach. Neither he nor the boat ever arrived.

There are several stories concerning Oscar's disappearance. One is that his boat was intercepted and sunk by one of several potential governmental agencies.

My sister and I believe the drugs-for-weapons deal went bad. Alone in Mazatlan, speaking very little Spanish, Oscar was an easy target. The narcos most likely ended up with the weapons, the money, and the drugs.

No one traced his disappearance.

Contributors

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Kristen Gallagher has published three books: *85% True/minor ecologies* (Skeleton Man 2017), *Grand Central* (Troll Thread) and *We Are Here* (Truck Books). Recent work includes a collaboration with Human Scale, *hs341: 85% True/minor ecologies*, an infinitely generative audio piece based on a collection of recorded natural sounds from Florida, USA and available through the Human Scale app. Other writing appears in *The Baffler*, *Social Text*, *Gauss PDF*, *Distantia*, and *Jacket2*. She lives in Queens, New York.

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ways, and *Raymus Media Magazines*.

Sophia Le Fraga creates text-based work that considers how language evolves in digital spaces. Her practice makes use of poetry, video, installation, photography, curation, and new media. Le Fraga is the author of *The Anti-Plays* (Gauss PDF 2015), *literallydead* (Spork 2015), *I RL, YOU RL* (minuteBOOKS 2013, Troll Thread 2014), *I DON'T WANT ANYTHING TO DO WITH THE INTERNET* (KTBAFC 2012), and the artist book *Other Titles by Sophia Le Fraga* (If a Leaf Falls 2016).

Dana Levin was born in Los Angeles in 1965 and grew up in the Mojave Desert. She is the author of four books of poetry, most recently *Banana Palace* (Copper Canyon Press) and *Sky Burial* (Copper Canyon Press), which *The New Yorker* called "utterly her own and utterly riveting." Levin is a recipient of many fellowships and awards, including from the NEA and the Library of Congress, as well as the Rona Jaffe, Whiting, and Guggenheim Foundations. She serves as Distinguished Writer in Residence at Maryville University in St. Louis. Copper Canyon Press will publish her fifth book in 2022.

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Arturo Ernesto Romo was born in Los Angeles, California in 1980. His artwork, mostly collaborative mixed media works but also drawing, has been circulated internationally. Fluency, agency and folly are central themes in his practice; he sees his artwork as a companion multiplier, folding folds, netting nets. His art-making is pushed through explorations on the streets of East and North East Los Angeles, which feed into an ongoing series of collaborations with writer Sesshu Foster. He is based in Alhambra, CA.

Romus Simpson is a poet, cultural critic, and folklorist. His poems have appeared in *Callaloo*, *Voices from Leimert Park*, *Southern California Anthology*, *Black Arts Quarterly*, and *Caffeine*. He has won the Sara Henderson Hay Literary Prize, the Palabra Poetry Prize, the IBW-LA Nancy Hayes Poetry Prize, the Ann Stanford Poetry Prize (second place), and he was a 2012 PEN Center USA Emerging Voices Finalist.

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