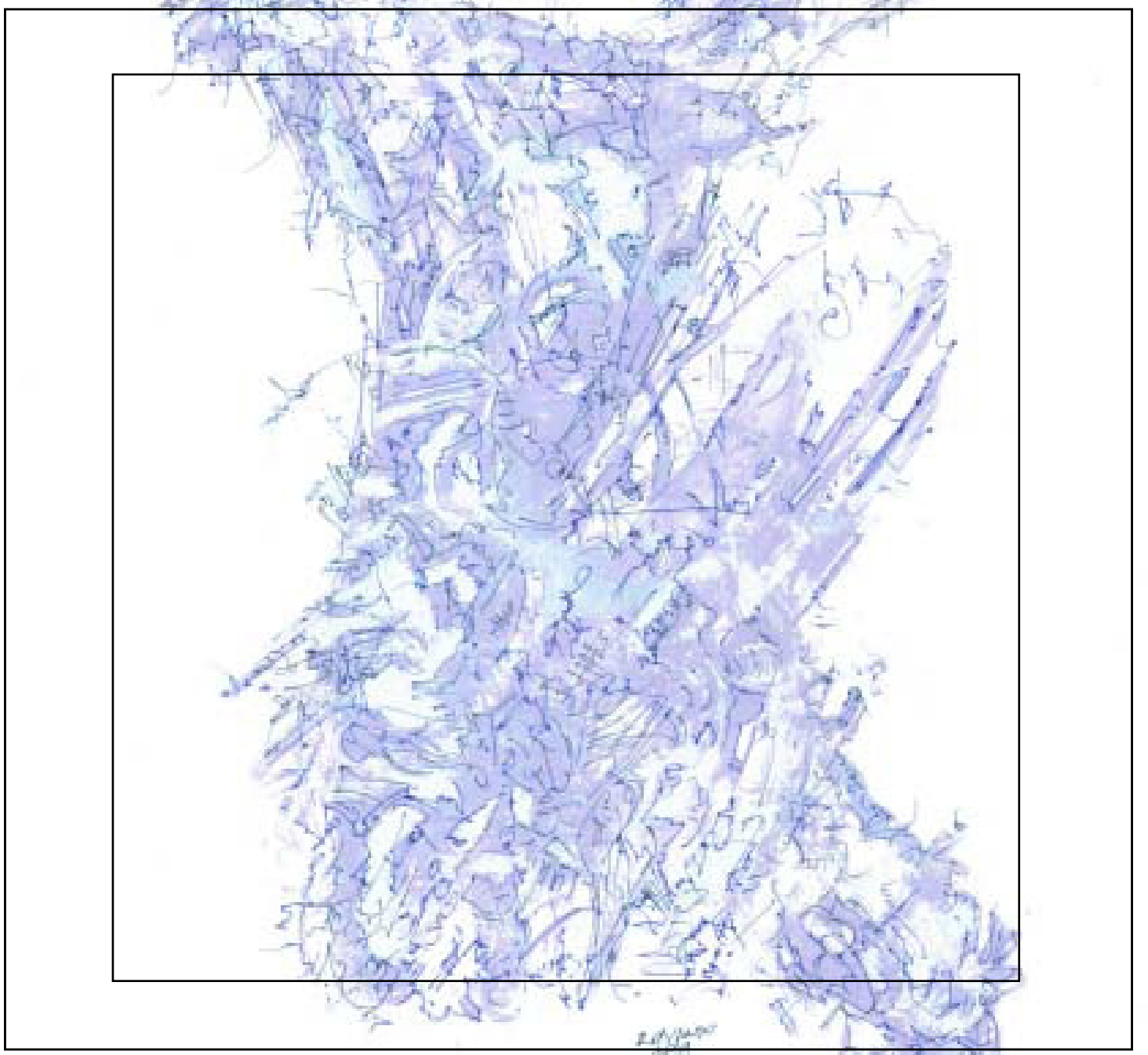
# AIR/LIGHT



ISSUE 4: FALL 2021


# Fall 2021

# Issue 4

Los Angeles, California

# AIR/LIGHT

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## DEPARTMENTS

*Air/Light* logo created by Letty Avila and Dennis Lan



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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.*

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

FROM THE EDITOR

# *Air/Light* Turns One

*David L. Ulin*

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One year ago, on October 5, 2020, Air/Light launched into a very uncertain world. The COVID-19 pandemic was raging; the presidential election was a month away. To call it chaos seems the most pernicious sort of understatement—and it has not gone away. Twelve months later, not enough of us are vaccinated, and the Delta variant has cut a wide swath across the United States and the world. The divisions of the last four years remain entrenched, or even heightened, in the wake of the attempted insurrection at the United States Capitol on January 6.

And yet, I want to say, although I am not overly optimistic, I am also not without a modicum of hope. If, as advisory editor Maggie Nelson suggests in her recently published book On Freedom, we need to come to terms "with the fact that everything is not going to be OK, that no one or nothing is coming to save us," this is not necessarily a tragedy. I don't mean to say that the issues that beset us are not considerable, nor that they will not, most likely, destroy us in the end. But who has use for easy optimism? That is what has gotten us into trouble all along.

No, what we need—more than bromides or empty affirmations—is clarity. We need to recognize who and where we are. Only then can we be truly responsible and present in the world. We need to be in conversation with one another. We need to recognize our common fate. We need to tell our stories, not to drown out anyone else's but to add to the quilt of our collective humanity, to recognize our grace and our fragility, to give space to one another's joy and suffering, to participate and move through existence on the most collective terms.

This is what we've sought to do with Air/Light over the course of this long last year, and what we continue to aspire to do. We have published more than 100 pieces since we launched last October: stories and essays and poems, art and music and collaborations, videos and interviews. We have built the foundations of not just a journal, but also—we hope—of a community. With issue four, we seek to continue this ongoing process of thinking and communicating and engaging, of … excavation is the only term that makes sense.

That, of course, is as it should be, for what else is the point of art? We share our work, our narratives not to show off but rather to connect. We write or paint or compose out of our experience, and in those efforts our readers, or our audience, may recognize themselves. I'm not referring to empathy, or not entirely; sometimes, empathy becomes a default fix. It is also about discomfort, and exposure, about the messy work of—to use a word I don't entirely trust or believe in—honesty.

This messy work, this middle ground, is where we live. It is the definition of the present tense. So welcome to issue four, for that excavation and that reckoning: that necessary questioning, in other words, and the uncertainty it provokes.

FICTION

# Wednesday

*Désirée Zamorano*

Gilbert drove down the 5 toward Sunset Beach with a deep green 1967 Mustang on his roll-back tow truck, its grill crumpled like newspaper.

He was grateful to have arrived long after the paramedics and the cops and the ambulances and the firefighters. He was grateful only to have to wonder at what the carnage had been. All that remained was a police car, a cop guiding vehicles, and fire sticks keeping traffic at bay.

Even so, he had seen enough. There was blood, there was a stuffed animal, a dirty gray plushy, and he felt himself getting squeamish, getting upset. But the toy could've been in the back seat of any car. A toy didn't mean a kid was actually in the car. People, kids, left things behind all the time.

He switched his playlist to reggaeton and blasted it. He was getting Amarisa into his music. And she was getting into his head. They watched crime shows together and she called what they were doing "cross-contamination." It made him laugh. There was something sophisticated and dirty about it at the same time. Of course, she only said it when her son was out of the room, or over at his dad's. That was fine with Gilbert.

"What do you mean, seeing someone?" his mother had asked last Sunday afternoon while dishing out chile verde with its chunks of tender pork and long strips of Anaheim chiles. The tortillas were already on the table, wrapped in a dish towel to keep them warm.

"If you want to know whether I'm sleeping with her, Ma, just ask."

She pointed the ladle at him. "Sin vergüenza!" she scolded. "You know

what I'm asking."

He dodged the question with a shrug and went into his parents' dining room to sit next to Valeria, his sister. Her hair was bright blue, and he told her he approved that message.

"Why do you gotta wind her up like that?" Valeria said to him, under her breath.

"I guess I just gotta," he said, and shrugged again.

Amarisa was a little older than he was, with an eight-year-old named Ethan, who cracked Gilbert up retelling the plots of TV shows he had never heard of. Amarisa's body was warm and welcoming, sexy in a way he hadn't expected a mom's body to be. She was funny; she was educated. She was a fucking college professor.

When he was in school, he hadn't been much of a student, but he wasn't a fuck-up or a clown. It wasn't until he was out that he learned anything useful, and that led him to where he was now, owning his towing business. His parents, his family, they'd also done well for themselves. Valeria was a dental hygienist.

The thing was, he was always with the prettiest girl he could find. Even now, he kept himself up, he worked at it, and the girls he usually went for were tiny and smiling and funny, and good where it mattered. There was Yolanda who was crazy and hot; there was Sarita—

His mom had loved Sarita. Her parents were from Jerez just like his mom's. His mom was so pissed when Sarita had ended it, saying, "Papi, why don't we just make a baby, like everyone else? We don't even have to get married, in the beginning." This while she was breathing in his ear, her nipples firm and hard against his chest. When she whispered about marriage, he felt like he couldn't breathe; his junk shrank; and that was the end of that.

Did he feel worse or better that Amarisa already had her own kid? He didn't think it made a difference. Just thinking of marrying made his chest tight, made him anxious all over. It was like every day after he got married would be the same, over and over and over again. He didn't like that feeling at all.

Like seeing that blood on the freeway.

It wasn't like that, exactly, with Amarisa. First off, she'd already been married; second, she had a kid. He didn't have anything against kids; he figured he'd have a son or daughter or two of his own one day. Heck, men could

father babies into their eighties, right? He didn't have to decide any of that just now.

Amarisa was sweet and kind and smart. So fucking smart. Too fucking smart. When they were together, she'd have to explain something she said, and it made him feel … not stupid, more like ignorant. Like when she told him Mexicans used to be segregated in schools in California, just like Blacks in the south. Blew his mind! There was a shitload of stuff out in the world that happened and was happening while he was working on towing cars and paying his bills and keeping his head down and everything up to date so the cops didn't get any more fucking ideas in their heads about checking his licenses and registration and who really owned the business.

Yeah, it wasn't gonna work out with her. You couldn't hang with a girl who had to explain herself to you. He wasn't gonna keep notes, and he couldn't date a girl thinking there was gonna be a test at the end.

But he really liked her. She made him laugh.

It was weird, too, cuz she was definitely not the hottest chick he'd been with. That'd be Yolanda, but she, too, had wanted that fucking ring, which felt like a choke chain on his neck. Couldn't do it. Could. Not.

This line of thought, it got him through the traffic on the 5, the denser traffic on the 55, and the maddening lane changes needed to reach the 405. He took the 405 exchange gently, followed his GPS through Fountain Valley, and ended up at the body shop in Sunset Beach. Cautiously, he pulled into the crowded parking lot. There were muscle cars in varying stages of disrepair, some little more than pastiches of primer-painted metal; others gleaming in shiny sparkling colors that reminded him of the toy cars he had put together as a kid. Cherry red, root beer brown, paint that shimmered with an underlay of stars.

Nobody stepped out to guide him, so he let his truck idle as he asked the head mechanic where to unload.  Someone peered out of the alcove and held up a hand.

"I need to unload this," Gilbert said, growing annoyed.

Huntington Beach made him nervous, and Sunset Beach was part of it. Lot of crazy white people who kept it on the down low until something or somebody got them riled and then out came the skinheads, the white bangers nobody ever called gang members, and the Confederate flag types. It reminded him of being a terrified kid.

But Gilbert was bigger now. He probably looked scary as hell to them. Big,

frightening, brown stranger dude. Good.

After twenty minutes, he'd had enough. He began to lower the lift on his truck. If they wouldn't tell him, he would unload the Mustang where it was. Block their drives. Let it be their fucking headache.

That brought someone out.

"Hey, you can't drop it there."

"So show me where you want it," Gilbert said.

Finally, another mechanic pulled a bomb ass Thunderbird off a car lift and then at last Gilbert got to work. The guy kept shouting out shit, like he was guiding: "Left hand down, José, little more, little more, there, two feet, there you go, José."

This gabacho was calling him José? What the fuck was that about?

Gilbert stepped out of his truck to release the straps. The hydraulics howled as he lowered the flatbed. What he was going to do when he was through here was to get in touch with Shirley, the girl he paid to take the calls, and take the rest of this day off. To hell with the stranded drivers, to hell with them all. Then he would text Amarisa, and if she was free, he'd take her out to lunch, or dinner, whatever worked. Take her son if he was around. He liked Ethan; he was smart, kind, a loner, nothing like Gilbert as a kid. Take her to Parker's Lighthouse, get a beer and steamers while the day ended, look at the pretty people, look at Amarisa, and smile.

He stepped into the car, turned the key, moved the transmission from Park to Neutral. Then, he winched the Mustang back and heard the satisfying thud as two tons of American steel hit the garage floor. He scrambled underneath, unhooked the cable, and crawled out again, returning everything to its proper place.

"See this here," Gilbert pointed to the florid lettering of his business on the side of his truck. "It's Gilbert, for the record."

The guy laughed and waved him away. "Whatever, homie."

He didn't take things personally, he did not take things personally, until in an explosion of emotion, everything was personal. He hated how these pendejos made him wait; he hated how this one talked to him.

"You are not my home boy," Gilbert growled, getting into the cab of his truck.

He shook his head. If this was a movie like the kind he liked to watch, he would be the hero glaring at this moron, and the guy would be too dumb to know what was coming next. Then he'd rev the engine and reverse into this

guy who would scramble for his life. He'd crash into the Mustang, pushing it through the supporting wall of the garage. Shifting direction, Gilbert would speed out of there, as the building collapsed into a heap of dirt and rubble, random car parts sticking out of the smoke and dust.

That was the movie of his life.

In the actual, not the virtual, version, he just sat in his truck.

He made a call. "Shirley? Never send me to this jack-off's place again. Yeah, the one in Sunset Beach. I don't care who wants this body shop. Look, I'm taking the rest of the day off, so you either call Nick or just pass, okay?"

He hung up and shot Amarisa a text. If she wasn't available, he'd swing by that pie place he liked, pick up a boysenberry and take it to his mom's. He'd have a slice with her.

Amarisa texted back. "I can't today, wish I could!" with a frowning emoji.

He texted his mom; if that failed, he could always see his sister after work.

His mom texted, "I'm out with your sister," with a dancing lady emoji.

He laughed. He'd just given himself the afternoon off, and now he had no plans at all. He'd feel like a fool calling Shirley back so he started his truck, pulled out of the body shop, and drove.

Things were great, and then they weren't. His business was fine, made him feel proud and good, until it didn't. Life was complicated: insurance forms, licensing, tickets, repossession, taxes, electronic devices. You couldn't fix any of that with a thump of a fist. It was work. He tried to avoid complications; he'd seen enough wreckage. He tried to avoid problems in advance. A problem like, how long until Amarisa got bored with him? That gave him a pang. Unlike his previous girlfriends, she didn't talk about marriage. Which was good, cuz then he'd feel all choked. She didn't talk about the future at all, which made him feel spontaneous, but also a little sad. He wanted to ask whether this was just for fun. It seemed to him there could be more. Not to make his mom happy. Was it possible it would make him happy? Maybe they should talk. But he had always felt that if there was a point in the relationship where you had to talk about it, it was already dead and buried.

He ended up in Belmont Shore. He pulled into a long parking slot reserved for RVs, grabbed a serape from behind the seat, paid the parking, and walked down to the beach. Dockweiler, Manhattan, Huntington? Always packed. Long Beach? Always empty. Gilbert spread his serape down close to the waterline. He practically had his own private beach here. It felt later

than it was, time change making the days shorter, sun heavier in the sky, wind kicking up the sand.

Gilbert sat still, squinting at the sea from behind his sunglasses. He watched the glint on the water, waves rushing forward and pulling back. Oil rigs, camouflaged as islands in the distance, downtown Long Beach to his right. In the water, a kiteboarder struggled patiently with his gear, kite down, surrounded by thick, black lines that looked completely tangled. In the distance, another kiteboarder zigzagged across the water, his hydrofoil skimming and sometimes leaving the surface of the ocean completely.

Gilbert was so intent on watching the second kiteboarder that he missed how the first one untangled himself, got up, and sailed again.

Sometimes the thought of all the days ahead of him, the same days over and over again, made him nervous. They stretched out like a repeated pattern, like a ribbon that began to wrap around him and coil into a snake. His heart would pound and he'd get all sweaty, like a workout, but not in a healthy way. He felt squeezed, out of air, like when Sarita had spoken of marriage. He saw all the days ahead of him, some happily pulling a truck, helping out, feeling useful, feeling fine, and others spent dealing with shitheads like today. The strangest thing was that nothing would change, nothing at all, and those feelings would just wear themselves out.

He felt cold. He saw blood on the highway.

A gull approached him, tentatively, and flew off.

But then, the kiteboarder went north, half out of the water, before turning and heading south again. The kite pulled him along, offering coordination and balance, making his movements look as effortless as those of a bird in the air. The other kiteboarder cut the water behind him, the two of them crossing along the coastline, up and down and back and forth. A rhythm that was stunning, soothing, that made him feel like there were possibilities ahead.

He had to show this to Amarisa. He had to bring Amarisa here.

As Gilbert watched the kiteboarders, his heart kept rising alongside them, as if they held a part of him aloft.

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

# How to Build an Artist

*Jackie DesForges*

There is a Twitter thread, almost twenty-five thousand comments long, about an eleven-year-old girl who was hit by a car and hospitalized for brain trauma. From her bedside, the girl's mother shared a tweet asking for prayers, and suddenly it was trending, and it kept trending for two weeks and celebrities started to chime in, and then the little girl—Molly—died.

I scroll through fifty comments or so before I have to look away. It's about two-thirds condolences and one-third people telling this devastated mother what she should be doing with her grief instead of posting on Twitter. I find most of it nauseating. A friend of mine, meanwhile, is thrilled.

"It's fascinating," she tells our class, sharing the link for the whole thread. "I read every single comment and took pages of notes. The timeline of her brain trauma is so helpful for me to see."

My friend is writing a novel. We're all writing novels. One of her characters suffers brain trauma in an assault, and my friend has recently felt like the timeline of this character's recovery is off. She has spent hours in depressing medical forums, typing symptoms and complications into Google. She's not thrilled by the horror of this girl's accident or death, but by the chance it's given her to get the words right. And we don't tell her that she's weird or obsessive or morbid or heartless. We are jealous. We wish the things we were writing about walked straight up to us and laid themselves down, fully exposed, ready for us to take what we need and move on to the next brows-

er window. Most of the time it doesn't happen this way. Most of the time we crawl after the thing that we need, leaving a trail of horrific online searches and concerned friends in our wake, and we are lucky if we can ever catch up.

*

Ana Mendieta is all over my house. She's taped to the wall below the window right above the desk where I usually write. She's pinned to the bulletin board that hangs in the dark corner where my standing desk lives. A book of her artwork props my laptop to eye level as I type this. She's all over the wall in the laundry room, which also serves as my art studio. In addition to writing about her, I am also making art about her, because once I started writing about her, I could not stop thinking about her. She's the saved podcast episodes on my phone and the screenshots of Instagram accounts that promote the work of female artists. She's half the notes I've taken for novel research. She's on the cover of the graphic novel on my nightstand. If there was a Twitter thread with twenty-five thousand comments about Ana, I would read every single one of them, too.

I remember the day I decided to put her in my novel. It was the same day I realized that I probably couldn't. I did another Internet search, though I already knew what it would say: Ana died in 1985 at the age of thirty-six after she supposedly fell from her apartment window and landed on the roof of the bodega below. Her husband, Carl Andre, was present and his 911 call was bizarre; he stated repeatedly that he was also an artist and that his wife "went through" the window. All their friends knew they often had intense arguments and there was some evidence of physical altercations. Andre was tried and acquitted for her murder, and the world just sort of moved on.

Except for those of us who didn't.

So even though my book is fiction, and even though it's my opinion that he pushed her, I know I can't take her off my bulletin board and put her straight into my book.

*

What I can do is make a new person. This new person can borrow from Ana: her age, her profession, her upbringing in Cuba, her graphic and brutal performance pieces, her sharp personality. I can pin all these things to a new person the way I've pinned Ana all over my house, and as long as I give this character a different name, I'm not directly accusing anyone of murder or infringing on any copyrights.

So I start researching how to build a new person from the ruins of another person.

*

*Isn't it embedded in your DNA?* a male friend asks when I am obsessing about this over lunch one day.

*Isn't* what *embedded in my DNA?* I ask back, though he's not the first man to suggest this.

*Making people. You're a woman. Women make people from scratch with their bodies.*

*I'm not sure she'll appear if I have sex with my book*, I tell him. But I make note of this concept for an experimental flash fiction piece I've been working on.

*

I have to admit it's an interesting idea. Cis women have an entire organ dedicated to the creation of new human beings. Even those of us who never plan to use our uteruses have to carry them around with us, this constant reminder that our bodies are meant to be used as incubators for other bodies. I wonder if this means we are predisposed to the creation of fictional characters in a way that men are not. I find dozens of scientific and medical articles arguing about whether or not there are differences in the creative parts of men's and women's brains. The consensus? A resounding maybe.

A Rolling Stone article claims that women actually create more innovative music than men do because women are less likely to be hailed as creative geniuses, so we have to make crazier songs in order to stand out.

But that's misogyny, not biology.

I wonder if it works the same for fiction. I think of some of the characters I can't live without: Jo March, Lizzie Bennett, Sula Peace, Hannah Wolfe, Cathy Ames, Dana Franklin. Mostly women, mostly written by women. I imagine this list says more about me than it does about anything else.

Still, each time I start a new character, I find myself paying close attention to my body, especially the part inside me that I never plan to use. Cis men walk around without that space inside waiting to be filled. They don't bleed every time it's left empty. That blood must make some sort of difference.

*

In her 1974 film *Blood + Feathers*, Ana Mendieta stands naked next to a creek. She maintains eye contact with the camera as she slowly pours a pitcher of blood over her chest, arms, and legs. She pours more down her back. Then she tosses the pitcher aside and lowers herself into a pile of white feathers and rolls around until they stick to her. When she is covered with them, she stands and slowly raises her arms into a strange position, bird-like.

The film ends.

According to The Tate: "In all her feathered performances of 1974, Mendieta transforms herself into the sacrificial victim—the creature that must be killed in order to produce new life. Blood is central to rituals of the Catholic Church, the religion in which Mendieta was raised, through the metaphor of wine. Real blood-letting through the sacrifice of such animals as roosters, turtles, and goats is a vital part of Santería, the hybrid religion developed in Cuba by African slaves in the nineteenth century, which fuses Yoruba culture (from southwestern Nigeria) with Spanish Roman Catholicism. However, while Santería sacrifice specifies the use of a male bird, Mendieta's bird-figures are unmistakably feminine."

*The creature that must be killed in order to produce new life.*

I take down one of my pinned images of Ana so I can add a new one,

which has been forming inside me for months. So far, the image is just a word I've written on a scrap of paper: Eva.

*

My Facebook ads suggest I have been expecting a baby for two years. Part of it is my age and part is the fact that I have a couple of baby naming websites bookmarked. I'm picky about my characters and usually I change names a few times before settling on one.

I've wondered—not infrequently—if this is because I was supposed to have an entirely different name. I was supposed to be Erin before my grandpa Jack died two weeks before I was born. I think of Erin as the ghost version of me, living some other life in some other realm. Is her personality the same as mine? Did she do the logical thing and decide to become a lawyer with a steady paycheck? Is she going to use her uterus? I hope she has good health insurance.

So maybe I feel some pressure about names. When you assign a character a name, are you also assigning a personality, a fate? My Internet searches progress: I go from baby names to names in general, then the science of names, quickly spiraling through browser tabs until I am at the Wikipedia page for "nominative determinism," which is the idea that your name might determine the type of profession toward which you gravitate. The page lists a few examples: someone named Igor Judge, who became the Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales for a while; a study that shows an unusually high number of men named Dennis who became dentists; a weather reporter named Storm Field, which feels so much like fiction that I know it has to be real. There is also something called "implicit egotism," which means we humans are unconsciously drawn to things that remind us of ourselves, even if it's just the letters in our names.

Is this why I have so many jackets?

The fictional Ana's name comes to me easily and I know immediately it is right: Eva. I like the sound of it, that it clearly sounds like Ana's name. I like that it's short and powerful. I like names with "v" in them because they're sharp. I like that it's derived from Eve, which has the Judeo-Christian association of being the first woman, and I like that when I search for it online, its

definition isn't framed as "the female version" of some male name.

In relation to the name "Ana," "Eva" is similar enough and different enough. I don't care if some art enthusiast reads the novel and recognizes Ana in Eva: I'm not trying to trick anyone. I want these two women to exist in a way that is similar to me and Erin—one that was and one that could have been, the same person with two different names, the same origin with two different potential outcomes.

*

When I workshopped part of my novel for the first time, an older man in the class tried to correct—among other things—my pronunciation of one of my characters' names. He explained to me that I wasn't emphasizing the correct syllable and I explained to him that since I'm the one who created the character, I'm the one who decides how the name is pronounced. He tried to explain to me again why I was wrong, as though I hadn't spoken, and I gave up and nodded, making a show of writing a note about it.

My note: *name the murderer after this dude*.

*

I have so many notes from the museum. The museum paid me to watch people. During each shift, I stood next to whichever artwork I'd been assigned that day, and I watched to see if anyone got too close or tried to touch. I watched influencers and tourists take their endless selfies. I watched people on first dates, parents corralling children, children corralling parents, school groups, tour groups, friend groups, people who had lost their group, the occasional celebrity.

I liked this job because I like to watch people. You begin to develop a sixth sense for body language until you can predict which person will take one step too far, which child will swerve a bit too close, who will end the date early. On my short breaks, I took notes on things I wanted to remember, like the Cecily Brown painting that seemed abstract until you stared at it for

a minute and realized all of a sudden you were staring at a woman down on all fours. People had so many different reactions to this painting, but one thing I noticed—and I kept a running tally—was the number of women who would trace the figure of the woman in the air with their hands. Men, on the other hand, were more likely to take a step back once they realized what they were looking at.

In another gallery, we had to guard *Under the Table* by Robert Therrien—a massive sculpture of a table under which guests were encouraged to walk, but not touch. Everyone touched it. Those of us working in that gallery knew we'd been assigned a futile mission, and we often gave up around hour two of the shift. Another tally: the number of times men would walk through and knock lightly on one of the chairs, presumably to see if they could identify the type of wood. I never once saw a woman do this, but at least three men would knock on the sculpture during every shift.

Most of my observations and notes on body language haven't been channeled into Eva, but rather into Rosie, the protagonist of my novel, who also works in a museum.

The problem with Eva is that her body isn't actually in my book. She exists in my novel only as a voice, through journal entries. Like Ana, she died from a fall.

*

Eva's journal entries are the only part of the novel I'm writing in first person, so in a way—and even though I've spent hundreds more hours with Rosie—I feel somewhat closer to Eva. Luckily for me, there are a lot of real-life female artists who kept journals or at least notes: Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Frida Kahlo. I'm currently on the waiting list to get into the library at UCLA—closed for COVID—which has a massive archive of the works and journals of Laura Aguilar, whose aesthetic was similar to Ana's. Both used their bodies as their primary media, whether they were making performance art or photographs. Both were brown and female in an art world that was primarily white and male. Both used their photography not only as a means of performance, but also as one of documentation.

Eva's artwork is similar to Ana's and Laura's. She also uses her body as her

primary medium, and her work consists mostly of photographs and videos. Documentation. At first, I wonder if it is a problem that I have created a character who views her body like this, while also taking her body out of the book completely. She is literally a disembodied voice.

But if you had to choose, maybe it is better to be a voice without a body than to be a body without a voice.

*

I draft one of Eva's journal entries as I wait for my gynecological exam. When I hit a sentence I don't know how to follow, I study the diagrams pinned to the wall: a uterus, a vagina, ovaries. There are posters explaining what to do if you want to become pregnant and what to do if you do not want to become pregnant. How to create life, how not to create it. I look at the draft of Eva in my lap. If only writer's block were as easy to remove as a condom.

Before the doctor examines me, she runs off a list of questions, including one I've been expecting for years: *Are you planning to have children?*

*Not biologically*, I say.

*OK*, she says, *because you know, after age thirty-five, technically a pregnancy would be considered high risk*.

I am thirty-two.

Ana died when she was thirty-six.

I had originally planned to kill Eva at the same age, thirty-six, but now I decide to bump it up a few years. I don't want her to have to worry about this shit.

*

Another workshop. I want to see what my classmates think of Eva's journal entries. Everyone is on board except for one. She tells me: *I like the idea of them, but they still feel too … structured, maybe? I think if it's a journal, it should be more scattered, stream of consciousness*.

I cross out everyone else's notes and keep only hers. She's pointed out the thing I could see but couldn't name. Without being able to structure Eva's body—the way she walks into a room, hugs her friends, eats a banana—I've been trying too hard to structure her language. But that, of course, is not the point of a journal. A journal is all voice, and voice is about expression, emotion, things that defy structure. I start to pull the sentences apart and rearrange them. I delete transitions so that she seems to bounce from topic to topic. It makes sense to her, and mostly to me. Does it matter if it doesn't make total sense to certain readers—or even to most?

One of the books propping my laptop to eye level is a Louise Bourgeois catalog that includes some of her notes and journal entries. They read more like impressionistic sketches than prose; she doesn't connect the lines and she doesn't have to. She was the original audience, not us. When we read these entries, we aren't so much spectators as spies, looking for clues to piece together the mystery of her.

*

I've always been too scattered as a person—in both my thoughts and personal belongings—to keep a journal successfully. Instead I keep notes. During my last move, I found a few old notebooks from junior high, when I would come home from school, complete my homework, and then shut myself in my bedroom to write notes or stories until dinner. There is also my high school physics notebook, which contains more Harry Potter fan fiction and random, half-formed thoughts lining its margins than any physics notes. There is one page where I kept a list of the only parts of physics I found interesting. At the top it reads: energy can neither be created nor destroyed, only changed.

I wonder if instead of destroying Ana and creating a new person, I have simply changed her into a different version of herself.

Some of the first writing advice I ever got—also during high school—was that you should write as though you are telling a story to a friend. Your form and voice will relax and you'll sound more like yourself, less like you're trying to impress. This seemed like good advice until I realized that some of my best writing has come from those scribbled margin notes or the things

I wrote for hours after school, before social media, when the only audience was myself. Sometimes the writing wasn't legible, sometimes there were tangents, but the thing that is hardest to nail down remains there: the voice. The voice holds all of these seemingly disparate threads together, and that's what makes journals or notes fascinating documents, whether they are yours or someone else's.

Especially if they are someone else's.

Even if I were giving Eva a body, her voice would still be the most important element to get right. So far, her portions of the book have been the easiest for me to write. Because they are written as journal entries or, more often, scattered notes, they are the only sections where I can almost convince myself that maybe they will always remain private, like those junior high school notebooks, all that private writing I've tucked so very safely back away.

*

Here is the trick: connecting all the threads so they are woven, not tangled. I'm not sure I believe in endings, so much as I believe that there is a good place and a bad place to stop. After you've done it enough times, you'll know where to stop when you see it.

Either that, or eventually you run out of thread.

*

I build out Eva's journals a bit more: I read, then I break up some of her sentences, then I rearrange those. I stop writing altogether and watch *Promising Young Woman* until it's well past midnight. The ending of the movie upsets me so much that I have to pour a glass of wine and sit on the cool bathroom floor with my cats until my heart slows down. I know this ending is bothering me more than it normally would because my mind has been in overdrive thinking about endings, so I can't just watch a movie and let it end without imagining the whole idea of it, all the threads the writer had to

weave.

This exhausts me, but not in any way that will lead to sleep.

I type a note in my phone: *I think of all the threads I'm constantly trying to weave into everything I write. Will I ever be able to look at anything – a note from a writing workshop, a joke I hear in passing, a tweet, a strangely worded billboard, a diagram in a gynecologist's office—without weaving it into something I'm writing? Threads are not heavy until you've spent thirty-two years gathering them. And the problem is: as soon as you've gathered enough that they weave together, as soon as you release them into the world and relish in their weight leaving your body—you see something else and you write it down and another pile accumulates.*

I go to my desk. Next to one of my pinned images of Ana, I have a bit of verse by Anne Carson: *The reason I drink is to understand the yellow sky the great yellow sky, said Van Gogh. When he looked at the world he saw the nails that attach colours to things and he saw that the nails were in pain.*

I think that is the perfect way to describe an artist: we see the nails that attach colors to things. Our brains are constantly making these connections whether we want them to or not. Unconsciously, we build things out of them.

I go to bed and open a new note in my phone. I draft a journal entry for Eva: she is exhausted, and her threads are beginning to unravel.

*

There is, of course, a fun part: when you know you're putting a thread in the right place. The way my friend felt after reading those twenty-five thousand comments on the Twitter thread—a thread, I think, and write that down—so she was able to find the words she needed to build the thing she'd been picturing in her head. I know absolutely nothing about weaving actual fabric threads together, but I imagine it must become instinctual after you do it enough times and make every mistake more than once. You can tell if your finger makes a wrong move. You can tell if something is off even if you don't know what it is. You can tell when you have to stop, step back, and look at the image you've created thus far.

I go back to the twenty-five thousand comments that make up the Twitter thread. The way they weave in and out of each other, some replies, some entirely new tangents, some images, some indecipherable, some so stream-of-consciousness they seem like accidents, like maybe someone forgot they were adding a piece to a very public puzzle.

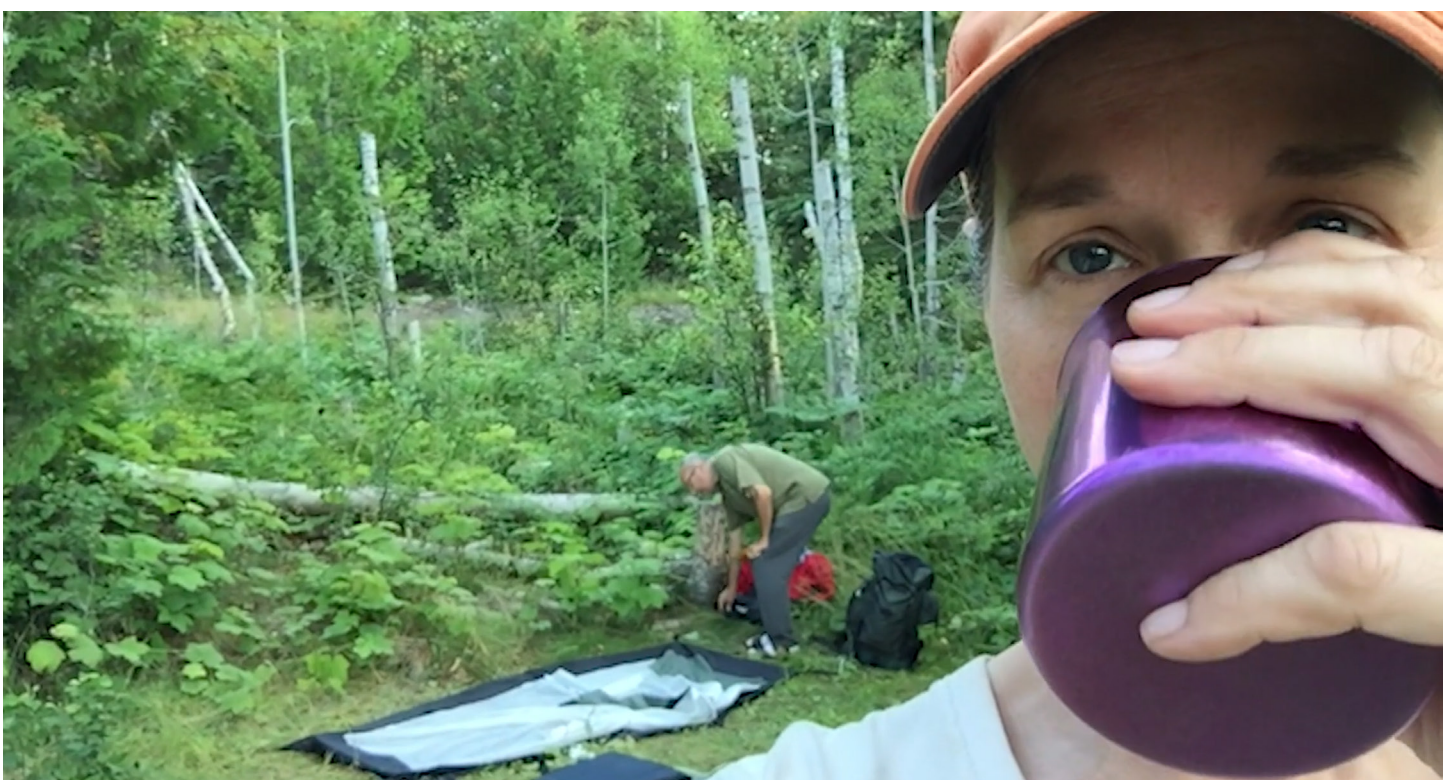
I look for a piece of thread I might be able to use.

It does become more instinctual, or maybe there is some sort of muscle that generates. You find the loose thread and pull it. You weave it back in somewhere else.

MULTIMEDIA

# A Meditation on Risk

*Brian Bouldrey and Will Sonheim*



POETRY

# “Memorial Day in the Post-Apocalyptic Sculpture Garden,” “The Blinding Noise of the Day,” “You Were Running Through My Thoughts”

Gail Wronsky

## *MEMORIAL DAY IN THE POST-APOCALYPTIC SCULPTURE GARDEN*

It was somewhere outside the Sunland-
Tujunga area. We were picnicking in a patch
of ruined statues. The broken column we
placed ourselves behind was Ionic. A thin
Egyptian cat effigy leaned on the head
of a carved marble warrior beside you, exhaling
a gust of ancient green incense that raced across
the sky as if it were a hunted parrot. I said,
“No one speaks of summer anymore, or
revolution.” You said, “The only topics left

for us are the property values of sand castles,
and the way that tiny babies chirp like birds."
Eventually, the moon stretched its fingertips
over the horizon and pulled itself shimmeringly
into the infinity pool of night. "Just don't go
all cross-eyed on it," I said. "Your face will
harden into that expression forever."

## *THE BLINDING NOISE OF THE DAY*

I hate waking up in the morning with
wings—having given birth to an egg
the size of a small VW.

Don't you?
I grope and sniff,
lost already somewhere

in the blinding noise of the day.
I call, and no one answers. It's been
a while since even the wind wrapped me

up in obsessive caresses.
Listener, you think that
this poem will end with me returning

to my bedroom, which glows like
the inside of a lemon and is
carpeted in tiny golden feathers. It does.

## *YOU WERE RUNNING THROUGH MY THOUGHTS*

My thoughts were trying to catch you.
Your legs cut them into thin slices—
the way a camera cuts time,

the way a knife slides through liver.
What were you looking for? The voice
of my mother? It's smaller than the wing

of a tiny insect. The voice of my
father leans against my skull wall like
a folded umbrella. I listen only to the

muffled whispers of ancient lyres. Is that
the sound you were running away from?
Have you stumbled upon my inner graveyard
yet? It will welcome you like a refugee.

POETRY

# Another Life

*Jose Hernandez Diaz*

I think I was a professional surfer in another life.
Or a boxer. A pugilist, I should say. A writer is a curse.

I think I was a Jack-in-the-Box jester, popping out of said box.
Maybe I was a wolf howling at the moon, wind, clouds.

Or, I was a ghost. Because other lives don't exist.
But, what if I was a ballerino in the '60s plotting

Against the government? A rebel ballerino—yes!
No, what if I wasn't anything but a poet and a painter?

What if it rained all summer? Snowed in spring?
How do you end a poem? With words. Precious words.

FICTION

# The Fish Dish

*Kathrin Schmidt, translated by Sue Vickerman*

Viktoria knew, obviously, that it was a trooper who'd fathered her, quite an old one to boot. This fact carried more weight than the fact that she'd been conceived in her mother's love for that trooper (by whom she was to be widowed). Viktoria had been battling all her life. Even her farts, as a baby born at the end of the war, had thundered like cannons. Throughout her school years, she fought all who had been Otherwise Conceived, slapping them, jabbing them with her elbows. She developed the physique of a stormtrooper yet still loved tight little blouses, flounces and lacy collars. Her face shone like a buffed-up medal awarded for exceptional bravery in the face of the enemy, the sort of medal she'd been desperately trying to obtain for her father shortly before his death. Viktoria learned to fillet fish, and by this means earned her keep, interrupted only by a single maternity leave. The one luxury she afforded herself was expensive bottles of imported scent, which she wore every day.

She left her first short marriage due to suffering chronic bouts of not feeling anything, though over the course of her life, this would give her a strategic advantage on quite a few occasions. For example, if she'd had proper feelings, she'd have been unable to enter a second marriage. But this she did, and once married, was able to embark on her ultimate offensive. She campaigned for, and won, a gallant little trooper whom she kitted out in cute sailor suits of increasing size over the years, while at the same time gradually increasing the no-man's-land between herself and his father. By her son's eighteenth birthday she had completely expelled his father from

her terrain. During one of her bouts of not feeling anything, she did once try to make herself fancy him again. The effort not only failed, it made her give up on men entirely.

Today, with the dawn of her fifty-fourth birthday, Viktoria felt victorious, convinced she'd at last been granted an indefinite furlough from sex. She reprimanded herself for having agreed to put on a spread for her lady and gentleman colleagues. It was Sunday and she had wanted to go over to her son's, but his lack of gallantry increasingly upset her: he would visit her four times a year at most. So she had heeded her workmates' suggestion that they might, for once, come over to her place for a nice cup of coffee and see her collection of scent bottles and also peruse the old Record Book of what had formerly been their workers' collective. Up until a decade before, Viktoria had collated this with conscientious accuracy. She'd always been especially taken with their visits to the "parent unit" — the Red Army station to which their collective was assigned. The young men's hollow grins captured by her Pouva Start bakelite camera had left her cold, aside from being marginally turned on by their somewhat shabby uniforms.

Viktoria put a record of military band music on the ancient gramophone. Then, as every year on her birthday, she struck up a conversation with her father. The old trooper was entirely at home in his daughter's head. Since his responses came out of her mouth, their exchanges were fluent and lively, with Viktoria sometimes formally clicking her heels to put his question, or smoothing down her skirt as she answered him. She loved these conversations with her father. They brought up emotions that were otherwise completely missing from her life. On finishing school, her son had immediately acquired long, frizzy hair and a preference for baggy jumpers and the kind of trousers that flap wide and loose around the leg, along with a preference for wide and loose women, one of whom he had married ten years ago and had somewhat pulled in by the drawstrings through giving her half a dozen children to contend with. Viktoria had a hard time playing grandmother to this chaotic, frizzy-haired flock. She didn't love her grandchildren and indeed her love for their father had faded.

She pulled two frozen desserts from the freezer compartment: an egg liqueur tart and a Black Forest gateau, and put them to thaw in the little room that had once been her son's. Viktoria used to borrow encyclopaedias for him from the local library, snip out pictures of the army uniforms and rank insignia of the Warsaw Pact countries, and attach them to a big board

she'd hung above his bed. Her son didn't like these pictures and pinned animal posters, photos of girls, and the front covers of popular magazines on top of them, which would routinely earn him a slap. But none of this was in Viktoria's mind right now, as she placed the cherry brandy beside the frozen desserts and got out the Record Book in readiness. She might have noticed, as she went past the front door, that a photograph had slipped from between the book's thick leaves and was slowly sailing to the floor.

Next, she dusted her bottle collection in the bathroom. The display of these had necessitated the purchase of fifteen glass shelves by mail order. She undid the top of her nighty and sloshed DEMIRELLE into her cleavage. As the perfume reached her privates, she happily felt the anticipated burn. She could now get dressed, but first rubbed the last of the rivulet into her belly. Glancing in the mirror, she was sure she saw a glint of vinegar in her eye. When Viktoria bent over the bathtub to decide in which order she should kill the three enormous carp, they remained absolutely still, as if playing dead might put off their actual death, and as if oblivious to the disgrace of big fish like themselves living in a bathtub. Viktoria named the creatures after three of the workmates who were due at her place that afternoon, and checked that none were showing any signs of the dropsy that commonly afflicted Cyprinus carpio. Manfred, Gundel, and Heiner were rehearsing their eventual rigor mortis in tiptop physical condition. Viktoria was surprised to be dithering over the order in which the handsome fish with their fine scales should go under the knife. Manfred was watching her with yellow eyes like plucked marigolds. Gundel's stare reminded her of her son's, back in the days when he was still wearing those sailor suits; meanwhile, the curiously doe-eyed Heiner was, she noticed, giving her a come-on look. She looked from one to the other, indecisive.

She quickly regretted her decision to leave the order to chance. Her strategy of closing her eyes to grab one of the creatures trapped in the tub's murky waters failed woefully, but Viktoria never submitted to defeat. She wiped her hands on the waterproof barbecue apron that the canning factory had bestowed on her and all the other fish women one Women's Day. Her body, which while being heavy was toned and angular, sprang with agility into the lounge where the sewing machine in the bottom of the oak sideboard was on standby for one of its rare deployments. At the slightly-too-low table, Viktoria cut some strips of Velcro and sewed them onto the inner surfaces of two odd gloves she'd kept for years, then pulled these on and

tried her luck once more.

Gundel turned out to be the first one she caught. The creature's eyes reminded her once again of the looks she used to get from her sailor-suited son; nonetheless, she had no problem with smashing and cutting off the carp's head with the meat cleaver and, with an expert hand, slitting open his belly, making bladder and intestines slide into the basin. A similar fate befell Manfred and Heiner. Viktoria boiled up the fins, bones, and heads, making a magisterial soup, the aroma of which carried through the whole building; meanwhile, the salted and marinaded carp fillets were laid to rest on a bed of steamed vegetables. Thereafter they were kept warm in the oven while a saucepan of coconut oil was placed on the stove, ready to fry the freshly chipped potatoes that Viktoria had delivered from the supermarket yesterday along with a box of sweet Hungarian wine.

She noted happily that there was still a little time before the guests were due to arrive. Time which she thought she might pass with a not too modestly poured glass of schnaps. She removed the stopper of a bottle her son had brought her one summer from the Czech Republic where he and his family had taken a cheap break, he said. A farmer had the moonshine on special offer at the holiday lets.  Viktoria's tongue savoured the lingering taste of plum, and it briefly crossed her mind, she should offer her father a glass. The old trooper had liked to drink spirits and had told of how they'd get themselves hammered, and a good thing too, before the final battles on the Eastern Front. She saluted her father with a glass, and he proceeded to tip it down the hatch in one. Viktoria gasped, contented. A second toast followed, this one being the old trooper's call, obviously. Soon, father and daughter were bending each other's ears just as they'd always done.

The guests were annoyingly late. Viktoria was displeased and took the fish out of the oven. She picked a piece of fillet out of the tinfoil and popped it in her mouth. Put the fish back in. Turned off the gas. Decided to sit at the window so she could start heating the oil as soon as she saw her colleagues coming up the street. Her father demanded schnaps. She obeyed without further ado and downed another glass before leaving her look-out post—fidgety, now—to go slice the desserts.

Thus, for a while, she teetered about within her flat's four walls, going back into her son's room to fetch the cigarettes she kept in a wooden box for special occasions, lifting the plate covering the bowl of chipped potatoes a few times, not knowing quite what to do, for the moment, with her

slap-happy hands—until she heard, loud and distinct, the old trooper's command for a third glass of schnaps. Her father's roar, coming out of her own temples, felt like punches to her skull, so before knocking back the old geezer's shot of a classic plum schnaps—Sliwowitz—Viktoria dissolved a sedative into it.

It was starting to feel warm. Viktoria began to undo the clothing she'd changed into for the visit, starting with pulling up the waistband of her button-through skirt because it was very tight and felt better if the top button was positioned above her stomach bulge. Then she undid her glitzy yellow blouse to a good way down and, with her left hand, endeavoured to reach the old-fashioned clasp of her old-fashioned brassiere. At last, she sat herself in the armchair in front of the window, stockings down, knees blue and shiny, ankles crossed, and sang. Her colleagues arrived shortly after to see a somewhat dissolute Viktoria leaning a long way out of her open window and belting out "Lili Marleen" until it was bouncing off the walls of the building opposite. They were bemused. Viktoria had always been regarded as odd and dour, while at the same time very controlled and particular. No one would ever have thought her capable of bellowing out ditties into the Sunday streets with such abandon. Beset with embarrassment, Manfred and Heiner grabbed each other's arms and hastily made their entry through the main door, which was already ajar, uncomfortably scanning the windows of the other flats to see if anyone was looking.

It was a while until, between two verses, Viktoria heard her doorbell ringing and attempted a brisk goose-step to her front door. Peering through the spy-hole she'd had installed four or five years ago to protect her from surprise visitors, she at first saw three carp and needed a further moment before realising it was Gundel, Manfred, and Heiner. Greeting the men with gusto, she let them in, slammed the door behind them, and led them into the lounge, one of her stockings all the while wriggling further and further off until it trailed along behind her fat blue leg like a train. Her guests, seated on the settee behind the slightly-too-low table, cleared their throats nervously, not daring to confer on how to deal with this. Meanwhile Viktoria, now in the kitchen, was battling with turning on the gas to fry the chips.

The next ring brought into her flat the four women who stood day-long beside Viktoria at the conveyor belt, extracting intestines. On seeing Victoria practically undressed, standing at the stove, the youngest couldn't stop giggling; the others however saw danger, and took themselves and the cook

to the safety of her bedroom where they put her clothes back on properly, pulling up her stockings and making her hairdo nice again. Victoria promptly regained her dignity and, drawing herself up, went through to the men, where the look in Gundel's eyes made her remember the tray of fish in the oven. The old trooper (of whom, needless to say, her colleagues were unaware) roared for a schnaps. From being his sharp-elbowed little fighter with her ready slaps all those years ago, Viktoria had gone on wanting to please him, and so poured him a fourth glass and drank it.

The women got busy in the kitchen and, unsure of which of the prepared dishes to take through first, decided by tossing a coin that they'd start by frying the potatoes. Manfred uncorked the first bottle of wine which, due to their urgent need for relaxation, was polished off in a quick succession of servings. Viktoria kept up, which was no mean feat. Luckily, the oily fish made her settle down into more of a daze, and she managed to reach for the Record Book. A bout of not feeling anything had come on, so that she almost couldn't be bothered to show it to them and talk through the old days, page after page. But an innocuous inquiry about her son jolted her back to her usual form, including a mouth sealed in what was nowadays a very firm silence on the subject of The Past. They sank ever more comfortably into the settee, extolling the merits of the wine and filling any potential gaps in the conversation with cake. And thus, all slipped into a hazy glow that made it perfectly alright to make up tales about the Red Army soldiers immortalised by Victoria's *Pouva Start*: how the German city had been seeded with their romantic love affairs; how the deserters among them had roamed through the nearby forests before their inevitable deaths. So warm and tender was the glow that Viktoria's womanhood became aroused, and when Heiner looked over with his doe-eyes, she very obviously tilted her chin at him, coquettish.

All had lost track of the time when (on Heiner's insistence) the guests headed off into the night. Viktoria closed the door behind them. She felt elated. In a return to her usual meticulousness, she put on the door chain, then, out of a desire to surrender to this unfamiliar feeling of happiness, she lifted one of her blue legs in order to do a little twirl on the other, as though starting to dance. At this, the photograph which had sailed out of the Record Book that morning inserted itself between the sole of her slipper and her fifty-fourth birthday's peaceful end. She went down with a whack. Late in the night, after Viktoria's breathing had already stopped (though the old

trooper was still bleeding from a head wound), the son whom she had not been expecting today came by.

*

## KARPFEN BLAU

*Kathrin Schmidt*

Viktoria wusste natürlich, dass sie von einem damals schon alten Krieger gezeugt worden war. Das wog, schien ihr, schwerer als ihr Entwurf in der Liebe seiner späteren Witwe. Denn Viktoria war zeitlebens im Kriegerischen zu Hause gewesen, schon die Fürze des zum Kriegsende geborenen Säuglings hatten die Wucht von Geschützdonner gehabt. In der Schulzeit verfolgte sie die anders Entworfenen mit ihren Handkanten und Schlüsselknochen. Sie gedieh zu hünenhafter Größe, liebte allerdings enge Blüschen, Volants und Häkelkragen, als sie erwachsen war. Ihr Gesicht glänzte wie eine frisch geputzte Medaille für besondere Tapferkeit vor dem Feind, wie sie sich ihr Vater kurz vor seinem Tode unbedingt noch hatte sichern wollen. Viktoria erlernte das Ausnehmen von Fischen und verdiente damit, unterbrochen nur von einer einmaligen Mutterschaftspause, ihr Geld. Einziger persönlicher Luxus waren teure Flakons importierten Parfums, das sie täglich benutzte.

Die erste kurze Ehe verließ sie mit einer chronischen Erkrankung an Anfällen von Halbherzigkeit, die sich jedoch im Fortgang ihres Lebens noch einige Male als Selektionsvorteil herausstellen sollte. Die zweite Ehe zum Beispiel wäre aus ganzem Herzen gar nicht zu schließen gewesen. Aber Viktoria schloss sie und begab sich sodann hinein wie in eine Entscheidungsschlacht: Sie wollte einen schneidigen kleinen Sohn und bekam ihn auch, steckte ihn in im Laufe der Jahre immer größer werdende Matrosenanzüge und warf den Kindesvater jährlich ein Stückchen weiter hinaus, bis sie ihn mit dem achtzehnten Geburtstag des Sohnes ganz und gar vertrieben hatte. In einem Anfall von Halbherzigkeit versuchte sie später noch einmal,

sich nach ihm zu sehnen, was ihr aber misslang und weiteren Männern die Tür vollends verschloss. Heute, am Morgen ihres vierundfünfzigsten Geburtstages, glaubte Viktoria ihren geschlechtlichen Ausgang versiegelt. Für immer, frohlockte sie, und brachte sich mit der Aussicht in Harnisch, ihren Kolleginnen und Kollegen eine Tafel richten zu müssen. Es war Sonntag, sie hatte eigentlich zu ihrem Sohn fahren wollen. Weil der sie aber mit seinem Mangel an Schneid zunehmend verärgerte und sie höchstens viermal im Jahr besuchte, hatte sie den Wunsch der Kollegen erhört, endlich einmal ihre Stube zu besichtigen und ihren Kaffee zu kosten, ihre Flakonsammlung zu würdigen und im Brigadetagebuch zu blättern, das bis vor zehn Jahren von Viktoria mit disziplinierter Akkuratesse geführt worden war. (Besonders die Besuche in der Pateneinheit der Roten Armee hatten es Viktoria seinerzeit angetan. Mit ihrer Pouva Start fotografierte sie schepperndes Gelächter in die Gesichter der jungen Männer hinein, die sie kaltließen, während ihre vergleichsweise kümmerlichen Uniformen für ein bisschen Bewegung in ihrem Bauch sorgten.)

Viktoria legte eine Platte mit Marschmusik auf den bejahrten Plattenteller und begann ein Gespräch mit ihrem Vater, wie sie es jährlich aus Anlass ihres Geburtstages führte. Der alte Krieger war ganz zu Haus in seiner Tochter und antwortete aus ihrem Mund, sodass Rede und Gegenrede munter flossen und Viktoria einmal die Hacken aneinanderschlug im Fragen, ein andermal die Hände an die Rocknaht führte im Antworten. Sie konnte diese Gespräche mit ihrem Vater lieben – ein Gefühl, dass ihr ansonsten ganz abhandengekommen war. Ihrem Sohn war gleich nach dem Ende der Schulzeit langes lockiges Haar gewachsen, er bevorzugte große Pullover, weit um die Beine flatternde Hosen und lose Frauen, deren eine er vor zehn Jahren geheiratet und ihr ein halbes Dutzend Kinder gemacht hatte, um ihr ein bisschen Festigkeit zu geben. Viktoria tat sich schwer damit, Großmutter einer Schar lockenköpfiger Liederlinge zu sein, sie mochte die Enkel nicht und hatte darüber vergessen, deren Vater zu mögen. Sie zog zwei gefrorene Torten aus dem Eisfach, Eierlikör und Schwarzwälder Kirsch, und stellte sie zum Auftauen in das kleine Zimmer, das einmal das ihres Sohnes gewesen war. Viktoria hatte ihm früher Lexika ausgeliehen aus der städtischen Bibliothek, die Bilder der Dienstgradabzeichen und Armeeuniformen der Warschauer Vertragsstaaten ausgeschnitten und an einem großen Brett befestigt, das sie ihm übers Bett hängte. Ihr Sohn mochte diese Bilder nicht und überpinnte sie mit Tierpostern, Mädchenfotos und Titelblättern

einer der bescheidenen Illustrierten, was ihm regelmäßig Handkantenschläge eintrug. Aber davon wusste Viktoria nichts mehr, dieweil sie zu den gefrorenen Torten den Kirschlikör griffbereit stellte und das Brigadetagebuch parat legte. Als sie sich zur Tür drehte, hätte sie bemerken können, wie eine Fotografie zwischen den dicken Seiten des Buches hervorglitt und langsam zu Boden segelte.

Im Bad entstaubte sie nun die Flakonsammlung, für die sie sich fünfzehn gläserne Wandborde von einem Versandhaus hatte kommen lassen, öffnete das Nachthemd und kippte einen Schwapp DEMIRELLE in die Falte zwischen den Brüsten. Zufrieden registrierte sie das erwartete Brennen, als das Parfum ihre Scham erreichte. Nun konnte sie sich anziehen, verrieb aber zuvor den Rest der Feuchtigkeit über ihrem Bauch. Als sie kurz in den Spiegel blickte, meinte sie einen Schuss Essig in ihrem Blick wahrzunehmen. Die drei massigen Karpfen in der Wanne hielten ganz still, als Viktoria sich über sie beugte, um die Reihenfolge der Schlachtung festzulegen. Als könne der Totstellreflex ihr Ende verhindern. Als wüssten sie nicht, dass ein Leben in der Badewanne großer Fische unwürdig ist! Viktoria versah die Tiere mit den Vornamen dreier der zum Nachmittag eingeladenen Kollegen und versicherte sich, dass keines Zeichen der Bauchwassersucht trug, wie sie der Cyprinus carpio häufig aufwies. Manfred, Gundel und Heiner probten die prämortale Starre bei bester physischer Verfassung. Viktoria staunte, als sie Unschlüssigkeit in sich spürte, in welcher Folge die fetten, spärlich beschuppten Fische unter den Hammer kommen sollten. Manfred sah sie aus aufgerissenen Mädchenaugen an, Gundels Blick erinnerte sie an den ihres Sohnes zu einer Zeit, da er noch Matrosenanzüge trug, und bei Heiner bemerkte sie gar eine Schrägstellung der seltsamerweise mandelförmigen Augen. Sie schüttelte fragend den Kopf.

Ihren Entschluss, den Zufall Regie führen zu lassen, sollte sie schnell bereuen. Die Versuche, eines der Tiere geschlossenen Auges im trüben Wasser der Wanne zu erwischen, schlugen nämlich jämmerlich fehl, und Misserfolg mochte Viktoria nicht leiden. Sie wischte sich die Hände an der imprägnierten Grillschürze ab, die sie einmal in der Konservenfabrik wie die anderen Fischweiber zum Frauentag geschenkt bekommen hatte. Ihr untersetzter, dennoch scharfkantiger Körper wagte behende Sprünge in die Wohnstube, wo im Unterteil des Eichenbüfetts eine Nähmaschine auf seltenen Einsatz wartete. Am etwas zu niedrigen Tisch nähte Viktoria in Stücke geschnittenes Klettband auf die Innenflächen zweier verschiedener,

zwischen den Jahren übrig gebliebener Handschuhe, zog diese dann über und versuchte ihr Glück erneut. Es musste Gundel sein, den sie schnappte, denn wiederum überkam sie beim Blick in die Augen des Tieres jene Spur der Erinnerung an ihren matrosenhosigen Sohn. Dennoch fiel es ihr nicht schwer, dem Karpfen mit dem Fleischklopfer den Kopf zu zertrümmern, abzuschneiden und dann den Bauch mit geübtem Schnitt aufzuschlitzen, sodass Gedärm und Schwimmblase ins Becken glitten. Manfred und Heiner ereilte das Schicksal ebenso. Aus Flossen, Gräten und Köpfen kochte Viktoria eine autoritäre Brühe, die streng durchs Haus roch, während die Fischleiber, gesäuert und gesalzen, in einem Bett aus blanchiertem Gemüse zur Ruhe kamen. So schmorten sie in der Röhre, als ein Topf Kokosfett auf den Herd gestellt wurde für das Frittieren der frischen gestiftelten Kartoffeln, die Viktoria sich gestern neben einem Karton süßen Ungarweins von ihrem Supermarkt hatte liefern lassen. Zufrieden stellte sie fest, dass noch ein wenig Zeit blieb bis zum verabredeten Eintreffen der Gäste. Zeit, die sie mit einem nicht eben kleinen Glas Schnaps zuzubringen gedachte. Die Flasche, die sie entstöpselte, hatte ihr der Sohn in einem der vergangenen Sommer aus Böhmen mitgebracht, wo er mit seiner Familie billig ans Urlauben kam, wie er sagte. Von einem Bauern war der Selbstgebrannte in den Touristenunterkünften angeboten worden. Was Viktoria auf der Zunge spürte, war nachhaltiger Pflaumenduft, und sie überlegte kurz, ob sie ihrem Vater ein Glas anbieten sollte. Der alte Krieger hatte gern Schnaps getrunken und davon erzählt, wie sie vor den entscheidenden Schlachten im Osten sich vollgekippt hatten, zum Glück. Sie prostete dem Vater zu, und der trank das Glas in einem Zug durch ihren Mund leer. Viktoria war zufrieden und wartete. Dem ersten Dusel folgte der zweite, der offenbar der des alten Kriegers war, und bald lagen Vater und Tochter einander in alter Manier in den ohren.

Die Gäste verspäteten sich zu allem Ärger. Viktoria mochte das nicht und nahm den Fisch aus der Röhre. Brach ein Stück Filet aus der Folie, schob es in den Mund. Stellte den Fisch zurück und drehte das Gas ab. Beschloss, sich ans Fenster zu setzen, um rechtzeitig das Fett erhitzen zu können, wenn die Kollegen die Straße heraufkommen würden. Ihr Vater verlangte Schnaps, sie gehorchte anstandslos und kippte ein weiteres Glas, ehe sie in Unruhe den Aussichtsposten verließ, um die Torten aufzuschneiden.

So wackelte sie eine Weile hin und her zwischen den kleinen Orten ihrer Wohnung, ging noch einmal ins Zimmer des Sohnes, um die Zigaretten

zu holen, die sie dort für besondere Anlässe in einer hölzernen Schachtel aufbewahrte, hob einige Male den Teller von der Schüssel mit den Kartoffelstiften und wusste nicht recht, was mit ihren Handkanten in dieser Situation am ehesten anzufangen wäre, als sie laut und vernehmlich des alten Kriegers Befehl nach einem dritten Schnaps vernahm. Sie hörte den Vater aus der eigenen Schläfe brüllen, er schien mit den Fäusten an die Kalotte zu schlagen, und Viktoria löste ihm eine Beruhigungstablette im Sliwowitz auf, ehe sie dem Alten das Glas hinter die eigene Binde kippte.

Bald wurde es warm. Viktoria begann, die schon für die Zeit des Besuches angelegte Kleidung zu lockern, schob zuerst den Rockbund hinauf, weil er sehr fest saß und das Öffnen ein wenig oberhalb des Bauches einfacher war, knöpfte dann die gelbglänzende Bluse ein gutes Stück auf und versuchte, mit der linken Hand den altertümlichen Verschluss ihres altertümlichen Büstenhalters zu erreichen. Schließlich saß sie mit heruntergelassenen Strümpfen im Sessel vor dem Fenster, die blauschillernden Knie und Schienbeine eins übers andere geschlagen, und sang. Als wenig später die Kollegen kamen, sahen sie eine recht aufgelöste Viktoria weit aus dem geöffneten Fenster gelehnt, laut schlug das Lied vom Kleinen Trompeter an die gegenüberliegende Hauswand, und wunderten sich. Viktoria galt als hart und seltsam, aber auch als beherrscht und akkurat. So ohne Weiteres wäre niemandem eingefallen, dass sie Gesänge über sonntägliche Straßen werfen könnte. Peinlich berührt fassten Manfred und Heiner einander am Arm, und als sie durch die angelehnte Haustür eintraten, taten sie es hastig und suchten die Fensteröffnungen der Häuser mit einem verlegenen Augenaufschlag nach Zeugen ab.

Es dauerte eine Weile, bis Viktoria in der Atempause zwischen zwei Strophen das Klingeln vernahm und zur Tür ihrer Wohnung einen scharfen Stechschritt probierte. Beim Blick durch den Spion, den sie vor vier oder fünf Jahren zum Schutz vor überraschenden Besuchern hatte einbauen lassen, nahm sie drei Karpfen wahr und brauchte einen Moment, in ihnen Gundel, Manfred und Heiner zu vermuten. Mit krachender Begrüßung ließ sie die Männer herein und schlug die Tür hinter ihnen zu, führte sie ins Wohnzimmer, wobei einer der Strümpfe sich tiefer und tiefer ringelte und schon als Schleier ihrem dicken blauen Bein hinterherwehte. Nervös hüstelten sich die Gäste aufs Kanapee hinter dem etwas zu niedrigen Tisch, wagten wohl nicht, einander einen Rat zu geben, was hier zu tun sei, während Viktoria in der Küche Mühe hatte, die Gasflamme fürs Frittierfett

zu entzünden.

Der nächste Klingelton brachte vier Frauen ins Haus, die tagsüber neben Viktoria am Band standen, um Därme zu ziehen. Die jüngste von ihnen konnte nicht aufhören zu kichern, als sie die weitgehend entkleidete Viktoria am Herd stehen sah, die anderen aber vermuteten eine Gefahr und brachten sich mit der Köchin in deren Schlafzimmer in Sicherheit, wo sie ihr die Kleider wieder anzogen, die Strümpfe richteten und das gelöste Haar in Form brachten. Eine gewisse Würde steifte alsbald Viktorias Rücken und ließ sie aufrecht zu den Männern gelangen, um sich mit einem Blick in Gundels Augen an die Fischpfanne im Ofen zu erinnern. Der alte Krieger, den die Kollegen freilich nicht kannten, brüllte nach Schnaps, den Viktoria nun zum vierten Mal in ein Glas goss und trank, um ihrem Vater auch noch Jahre nach der Handkantenkindheit zu gefallen. Unschlüssig, welche der vorbereiteten Speisen sie als erste auf den Tisch bringen sollten, machten sich die Frauen in der Küche zu schaffen und ließen einen Münzwurf entscheiden, zunächst die Kartoffeln zu frittieren. Manfred entkorkte die erste Flasche Wein, die in schnellen Zügen getrunken wurde für eine schnelle Entspannung. Viktoria hielt mit, was nicht leicht war. Zum Glück dämpfte der fette Fisch ihren Zustand in eine nicht zu deutliche Benommenheit und gab ihr die Kraft, nach dem Brigadetagebuch zu greifen. In einem Anfall von Halbherzigkeit hätte sie es sich beinahe nehmen lassen, den anderen die alten Zeiten Seite für Seite selbst vor Augen zu führen und zu erklären, aber die eingestreute Frage nach dem Befinden des Sohnes brachte sie in Fasson zurück und ließ ihren Mund aufgehen zu einem nun sehr entschlossenen Ausweichen auf die Vergangenheit. Man suhlte sich in den Tiefen des Kanapees, sprach dem Wein zu und stopfte mit Torte, was eine Gesprächspause hätte werden können. So schlitterten sie gemeinsam in einen Nebel, der sie Geschichten erfinden ließ, in denen die Roten Soldaten aus Viktorias Pouva Start zarte Lieben in die deutsche Stadt hinein pflegten oder aber als Deserteure durch den nahe gelegenen Wald streunten vor ihrem unausweichlichen Tod. So zart ward der Nebel, dass Viktoria ihren geschlechtlichen Ausgang spürte und auf die leichte Schrägstellung der Heineraugen allzu deutlich mit einem bemühten Schiefhals einging. Niemand wusste, wie spät es war, als die Gäste auf Heiners Drängen zum Abend hin aufbrachen. Beschwingt schloss Viktoria hinter ihnen die Tür, gewann im Vorlegen der Kette sogar ein Stück der gewohnten Akkuratesse zurück und wollte sich eben, in dem sie eines der blauen Beine hob, um sich auf dem anderen wie

zum Tanze zu drehen, einem ungewohnten Glücksempfinden hingeben, als das am Morgen aus dem Tagebuch gesegelte Foto sich zwischen die Sohle ihres Hausschuhs und den friedlichen Ausgang ihres vierundfünfzigsten Geburtstages schob: Sie schlug hin. Sie hatte schon aufgehört zu atmen, aber der alte Krieger blutete noch aus ihrer Schläfe, als am späten Abend der Sohn kam, den sie nicht erwartet hatte heute.

POETRY

# “Tempelhof” and “Berlin”

*Rachel Mannheimer*

## *TEMPELHOF*

It’s like the mountains, Chris said
about the open field. It was flat like a track—
had been a city airport—
and when you ran, you could always see
how far you had to go. There weren’t many trees
and it was late for leaves, but there were birds.
The hooded crows were new to me—
hooded, I guess, for the black
that covered their heads, but it was the gray
down their bellies and their backs that was distinct.
They hopped around the baseball diamond, near first base.
Darkly, I had joked about the barbed wire curling
along the top of a nearby wall. But there actually was a camp here.
Forced labor for Lufthansa. Eleven were killed
in a Pittsburgh synagogue the morning we flew out—
the sanctuary where I might have prayed with Zev.
(I told him once I hated him. Stayed with him
for two more months.) All around Berlin,

there was considered signage about history.
I stopped under the banner for the home team—
Berlin Braves. Stern face
with familiar war-paint, feathers.
The boys on skateboards held surf-kites and sailed
down the former runway, toward the fenced-off section
where refugees were housed
in modular containers—a "container village"
is what I'd heard it called. Or they landed jumps
off granite slabs repurposed for the designated skatepark.
Beyond the fence, what looked like circus tents.
It was warm for November and women my age
draped overcoats over their strollers. Everywhere,
people whose judgment I trusted
were having kids. My oldest sister
had two little girls—sometimes slipped
and called them by my name.
I watched Chris up ahead—
now turning, now waiting, jogging in place.
I wished Mom could have met him. I held my arms out wide
in recognition. We were only in Berlin
these two gray months and wouldn't see
the light come back. We were having trouble
waking up, but we were trying to run
every day, to adjust.

## *BERLIN*

The other memorial at the entrance
to Weißensee Cemetery
is for 12,000 Berlin Jews who fought
in the First World War and died.
Inside, most of the stones are simple tablets.
Some rest on tree stumps also carved of stone,
like music on a music stand. Some have fallen off.
Some bourgeois families built impressive tombs.
A few large stones with family names have spaces
for family never buried here as planned.
On others, names are scratched in
with the death date and the camp—
someone returned. And there's a whole field
of urns. Early on, camp administrators
sent ashes back to families, for a price.
There were so many Jews before.
You feel their multitude in the cemetery's size—
so enormous that a few
who fled their homes and hid
on its vast grounds all through the war
managed to survive.

ESSAYS/NONFICTION

# This Frantic Bounty

*Chris Daley*

Scholars and their obsessions. I heard all about them when I entered graduate school: that professor is obsessed with postcolonial narrative, this professor with film stars and visual culture, another with Victorian poetry. I had my own brief infatuations: with urbanity, transgression, war literature, and some abstract combination of the categories I called "desiring machines," inspired by Deleuze and Guattari. But in the end, I only had one obsession, one angle.

*

When I recently mentioned my dissertation topic—Los Angeles literature and alternative religion—to a client, he said, "Oh, everyone loves cults." It's not the first time I've heard this sentiment. I may even share it. The question is why? What is the lure?

*

It might have started for me at the foot of the Hollywood Hills in the mid-1990s when I moved to a studio apartment in a five-story brick building

constructed at some point around the advent of the talkie, complete with Murphy bed and built-in vanity. Across the mini-mall parking lot next door, I could see the Church of Scientology Celebrity Centre (ostentatiously using the UK spelling): a gorgeous, stately home for mysterious, possibly sinister events.

When family and friends would visit from the East Coast, I'd pack them in my Mazda and drive the length of Sunset Boulevard, stopping only after we arrived at the Self-Realization Fellowship Lake Shrine a few miles from the coast. We'd wander the grounds and pay homage to all the Los Angeles religions represented there, the small shrines and the origin stories, before I'd relent and take them to the ocean at last.

*

In the mythos of the American frontier, California was the end of the line. A helpful metaphor may be that of the pioneer hitting a wall—in this case, the Pacific—a full stop that marked the final destination where dreams may be realized and spiritual searching fulfilled. The force and flow of all this movement, however, would not dissipate when it reached the obstacle. Instead, manifest destiny would turn backward and inward, the exploration continuing now within the individual. The development of countless new religious movements is evidence of this turn.

*

In 2021, we watch *The Path* and we watch *The Leftovers*. We watch *Wild Wild Country*, we watch *Tiger King*, and we watch *The Vow* and its cult companion *Seduced*. We watch *Bikram: Yogi, Guru, Predator* and we watch *Jesus Camp*. We watch *Us* and we watch *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* and we watch *The Invitation*. We listen to the *Cults* podcast and the *Heaven's Gate* podcast. We read *The Incendiaries* and *The Girls* and we read *Zero Zone* and *Educated* and *Hollywood Park* and ...

*

Why Los Angeles? Why to this day is it the home of the cult? In 1910, the city had a population of just over 300,000. By 1960, it could claim 2.5 million residents. During this period, Los Angeles was blowing up. Many came to the city looking to change their lives, to find new beginnings or a reimagined set of selves. This new life could include a new religion if they were so inclined. In fact, there was an abundance of religions to choose from. Forget the authority of the church in which they'd been raised—the spirit was theirs for the giving.

*

I blame Nathanael West. Somehow I wound up with the small, blue Signet paperback edition of *The Day of the Locust*, which still smells of the pungent sweetness of the used bookstore and deliverance. After reading it for the first time, I would never be the same. West's Los Angeles became my Los Angeles, and I was forever on the lookout for the next promise of salvation.

> *He visited the "Church of Christ, Physical" where holiness was attained through the constant use of chestweights and spring grips; the "Church Invisible" where fortunes were told and the dead made to find lost objects; the "Tabernacle of the Third Coming" where a woman in male clothing preached the "Crusade Against Salt"; and the "Temple Moderne" under whose glass and chromium roof "Brain Breathing, the Secret of the Aztecs" was taught.*

West's characters desire something outside of themselves, something to justify how they are living. Whether this higher power takes the form of fame, sex, love, money, or Dr. Know-All Pierce-All, what connects them in their misery is both the search for salvation and the repudiation of that search. Earnest or absurd, does Los Angeles draw the fervid? Or does it create them?

*

Los Angeles was populated practically overnight by transplants and migrants who spread out across the vast terrain of the metropolis. This dislocation—geographical or otherwise—encouraged fresh affiliations and spiritual associations. Those who left behind communities with strong religious ties naturally sought kinship in their new city, but the freedom and innovation associated with the California coast inspired risk-taking and new identities.

At the same time, the anxiety of displacement, the hardship of the Depression, and the allure of well-crafted promises from a variety of sects drew lonely and ailing people to invest, both emotionally and financially, in new spiritual enterprises. The film industry also created an aesthetic of unreality that made the drama and spectacle of alternative religions acceptably attractive.

*

In the inevitable way of Hollywood film adaptations, I now have a hard time thinking about *The Day of the Locust* without seeing Burgess Meredith's peddling suitcase, Donald Sutherland's hands, or Karen Black's lingerie. For ten years, I lived across the street from one of the early Hollywood studios, and when I climbed the stairs to my apartment, I would pass a sign that read "No Agents or Peddlers." I thought of West each time. Apparently, agents went door-to-door between the wars, trying to steal starlets in short-term rentals away from their current representation.

*

So what are cults, historically speaking? For the most part, a) they have a limited membership in comparison to mainstream religions; b) they introduce a heterodox dogma of some sort that distinguishes them from prior religions; c) they are formed under the auspices of one (usually living) indi-

vidual or a small group that is responsible for spreading their influence; and d) they originate or assume a new form in the twentieth century. Common features include charismatic leaders, complicated histories and rituals, and secret—or at least vague—doctrines. Some alternative religions got their start in Los Angeles, such as the I AM Movement or The Source. Some began elsewhere but either relocated to Los Angeles or were represented by an important sect, such as Theosophy or the Foursquare Gospel. Some developed fully formed identities in other locations, only to see their leaders, such as Pentecostalism's Kathryn Kulhman or the Seventh-Day Adventists' Ellen White, retire to the West Coast.

*

When considering the contemporary fascination people have with cults, I think of my favorite film of 2019, *Midsommar*. Its director Ari Aster grew up in the Southwest before moving to Hollywood to study film, perhaps also living near the Scientology Celebrity Centre. While *Midsommar* does not take place in Los Angeles, its pageantry and narrative capture the appeal of some of the city's most popular religious pursuits.

As an admirer of Aster's first feature film, *Hereditary*, I was excited to see what he was up to, so the weekend *Midsommar* opened, I walked to the Los Feliz 3 triplex theater, got some Red Vines, and settled in. Florence Pugh plays Dani, the girlfriend of a pretty boy grad student in anthropology named Christian. He and his friends have plans to visit Sweden with Pelle, an exchange student in their program, who is traveling home for a solstice festival. The festival has been happening in Pelle's village for as long as it takes to entrench a ritual as fucked up as the one portrayed in the film.

Dani is traumatized after her sister kills their parents and herself by funneling carbon monoxide into the house. Christian's friends don't want her to come to Sweden, but he doesn't have the heart to tell her, so she tags along, saving her screams for the airplane bathroom. Once they arrive at the village, we discover that it is home to a full-on pastoral homicide cult, and Aster takes us on a glorious and horrific journey.

(I have a theory that the cultish end of *Hereditary* is just a preview of the film Aster really wanted to make: *Midsommar*.)

*

As Southern California became a destination in the nineteenth century, the conception and reality of the frontier was instrumental in encouraging religious fervor. Many prospectors and other settlers from both within and without the United States left behind not only family and roots but also religious ritual and a sense of community. What many seekers found in the variety of religions offered in Los Angeles was a choice of prescribed recipes for transformation. For the immigrant at the end of the frontier, reinvention was the one remaining direction of limitless possibility, although as Carolyn See has pointed out: "You get what you want, then what?"

*

Midsommar is just one pop culture example of our current fascination with the acceptable attraction of cults, a cinematic extension that hearkens back to an earlier cult classic, *The Wicker Man*. Each individual in *Midsommar* has different motivations drawing them to Hårga, the ancestral commune behind the solstice festival; they occupy various positions on the spectrum from repulsed to intrigued to entranced. One of the most entertaining subplots—and, as a former grad student, also horrific in its own way—is the intellectual property battle between Christian and a character named Josh, who has traveled to Sweden because of his anthropological and academic interest in the commune's rituals. Or I should say, Josh's interest is usurped by the unfocused and unoriginal Christian in yet another occurrence of a white man's appropriation of a Black man's ideas.

*

In the 1953 film adaptation of H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, aliens

come to Earth, bent on human destruction. Southern California stands in for the world when an alien spaceship crashes in a small town called Linda Rosa. Representing two poles of the region's industry and energy—science and religion—a "Pacific Tech" scientist and a minister's niece team up to combat the invasion. When the minister tries to intervene and convince the aliens to accept a peaceful resolution, he is vaporized. Scenes in Los Angeles show the chaos overtaking Earth, complete with a riot on the downtown streets. The aliens are eventually annihilated, not by military intervention or high-tech weaponry, but by a bacteria that spreads lethally through their population.

One of the final scenes of the film is most relevant to us here: when the aliens appear indestructible and the end of humanity seems imminent, people flee in droves to their nearest church, the last sanctuary of the apocalyptically threatened. This link between the end of the world and the overwhelming need for spiritual solace recurs continually through the canon of Los Angeles literature. The apocalypse is both feared, an anxiety inspired by the ongoing instability of the landscape, and desired by those seeking further spiritual frontiers and a long-deferred meeting with their maker.

*

In a recent conversation about this cult attraction, I asked a friend what he thought drew people to alternative religions. He spoke of the intensity of belief, its magnetism, and how like a whirlpool or riptide, the pull of devotion and fervor could cause people to forfeit their former spiritual affiliations and abscond from their lives despite the loss or destruction that would be left in their wake. The power of the belief is its own seduction.

"Don't you think?" he asked.

I considered his explanation for a moment.

"I think it would be relaxing," I said.

*

There's no single reason that acolytes are drawn to cults. Some need to feel special and appreciated, recognized in some way for their capacity to understand; some need to belong inside a frame, to exist in opposition to those outside; some search for the final lifehack that will fix all the bugs that are really features; some are captivated by the theatre of it; some are lured by the promise of easy sex, because honestly, what good is a cult without easy sex?

In *Midsommar*, Christian is approved to mate with a character named Maja on a bed of flowers while the naked village women chant over them. One elder even joins in, pushing Christian from behind as he thrusts. That is all it takes, beyond the water with "special properties" he imbibed beforehand, for him to toss everything away.

*

But what about the view from the outside? Why are we so interested in watching people join cults?

On one hand, it's largely vicarious. We can imagine what it would feel like to belong, to reap the free love, to eschew our responsibilities as autonomous beings. We can also imagine what it might be like to be the cult leader—a position that is largely about power and abuse of that power, but of course, we would be benevolent leaders. Has there ever been a leader who didn't tell themselves that there was some benevolence behind their power?

On the other hand, it's drama. Drama we can consume from a distance and enjoy as much as any other form of entertainment predicated on someone else's confusion and pain.

Sometimes it's even comedy.

*

In looking at various new religious movements in Los Angeles during the twentieth century—spiritualism and Scientology, Theosophy and the Church

of the Nazarene, the Vedanta Society and Pentecostalism, the Self-Realization Fellowship and the Seventh-Day Adventists, Kabbalah and the Jesus People—we can see that the spiritual landscape of the city was both a forerunner and a response to religious changes occurring across the nation. Because of the character of religious pluralism in the city, new movements often had to distinguish themselves through extreme narratives of salvation or demonstrate their marked reinterpretation of the established faith from which they originated. "California," historian Charles A. Fracchia once observed, "is the laboratory—the 'great crucible,' so to speak, where new religious forms are being forged."

*

I live north of downtown Los Angeles, in an area that is home to the Scientology West Coast Headquarters, Scientology Media Productions, the Scientology Celebrity Centre, and the Scientology-sponsored Psychiatry: An Industry of Death Museum. Frequently, I use the Headquarters campus to turn around while looking for parking along Fountain Avenue; I dismiss proselytizers in matching vests when I am on my way to doctors' offices at Kaiser Permanente; I stand in line to order lattes behind polo-wearing Sea-Org members at cafes in Los Feliz.

My neighbors and I live amidst what is likely the largest cult on earth and—despite the horror stories in Lawrence Wright's *Going Clear* and Leah Remini's *Scientology and the Aftermath*—we go about our business as its members go about theirs. Did Scientology manage to escape the vilification reserved for Charles Manson or Jonestown because their religion is so uncomfortably strange? Perhaps Scientology is perfectly poised to embody the shrapnel at the end of the frontier.

*

Scientology represents a throwback to the way alternative religions used to function in Los Angeles: buying property, attracting celebrities, and sell-

ing success—be it spiritual or material—to their members. In the 1960s, the rise of counterculture ideology led to an emphasis on youth and, with the 1969 murders by the Manson Family, an emphasis on danger. Manson really turned the tables. The cults we imagine or witness today are informed by him and the violence he inspired. Helter Skelter and Jonestown broke open the possibility of annihilation at the hands of cults, which has taken its most deadly forms in places like Waco and in groups like Heaven's Gate.

Once the anti-cult movement got under way in the 1960s, the word "cult" itself became a term of opprobrium. For the cults of pre-1960 Los Angeles, the emphasis was on reinvention and community, no matter how nonsensical or detrimental the form.

*

In a turbulent environment like America in the 1930s (or now), new religious movements that emphasized the strength of the individual within the structure of an organized community provided, simultaneously, a sense of belonging in an era of collectivism and an escape from the pressures of historical reality. Peter Washington describes how the religious leader of the 1930s addressed the political climate of the era by focusing on the individual instead, "claiming, indeed, that it was only through individuals that any real change could take place in the world, and that it was worse than useless to address problems at the political level." Disenchantment is required for conversion. The gurus supplied the criticism and the path to the "realization of possibilities," an open market economy for spiritual salvation.

*

Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, dreams are dashed and in need of constant replacement. A longing for health or fame, love or money, if not replaced by a new messiah, can be converted into a desire for havoc. Thus, the attraction of any spiritual path: a way to make

sense of exile and displacement, which are, of course, common human conditions. A way to make sense of how we live.

Faced with ideas of apocalypse and a landscape of aggression, the early residents of Los Angeles often used the search for salvation as a way to ground themselves in a new identity, a complicated pursuit in what may have seemed to them a city at the end of the world. Today, in what may be a world at the end of the world, it's equally urgent to reconsider the appeal of the cult and find something else to love.

POETRY

# “For a Person Who May Not Even Exist,” “Just Another Poem”

*Alexis Garcia*

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## *FOR A PERSON WHO MAY NOT EVEN EXIST*

I had never intended to give up
Blame it on every lackluster infatuation
That I convinced myself
Was meant to be meaningful.
I found myself overtaken by fantasy
Blame it on every instance
Where I took a step back
To mean a step in the right direction
I clung needlessly to the idea
That my person would reveal themselves
In due time
Waiting.
Fading.
A casualty of my feigned optimism
It is by no means an excuse
But a mere crutch that I grasp

When it starts to feel as though
I've been here before and therefore
I must retreat
Back to the drawing board
And decide once and for all
If I will continue to be
A prisoner to my past.

## *JUST ANOTHER POEM*

Our time has come and gone
And you have become
Just another poem
Meant to be written and
Looked upon briefly during
The moments where I feel
Obligated to reminisce since
Even the simplest of things can
Trigger a memory that seemed so
Insignificant at the time but
Leaps onto the page
Extending on a lapse in judgment
A period of weakness
And you have become
Just another recited line
Meant to be spoken of, not to
And never heard from again
A fond cognitive error
I have given you space to take up
A short time to continue to linger
To free up the amount
That you have taken from me.

FICTION

# Everyone Was Singing "Freiheit"

*Lisa Alvarez*

The bus was running late, so Laurie arrived just after the memorial service began. Because every folding chair in the church community room was filled, she stood next to Malcolm and Annette, an elderly couple she knew from evenings spent stuffing envelopes. Laurie suspected that she had folded and unfolded each of those chairs several times over during the course of weekly meetings and other events throughout the last year. She knew well the cool weight of the cream-colored metal, the familiar creaking resistance, and the satisfying snap-into-place. The placard on the wall announced that the room seated 100. At least two dozen more stood. Cracks were still visible in the drywall from the recent earthquake.

Everyone was singing "Freiheit." A cheerful, chubby banjo-playing man led them, translating each verse in carefully enunciated English, before returning to the original German. Some looked down at the lyrics, extra-large on half-sheets of paper. But most, like Malcolm and Annette, marched through these verses, singing in robustly gruff-sounding syllables about the Spanish heavens and plains, the far-off homeland and the fascists, the bullets falling like hail and their comrades in the trenches.

As soon as the song was finished, Annette turned to her. "I haven't sung 'Freiheit' in years," she said. Her large eyes, brown and rimmed with black eyeliner, were wet. She pulled a tissue from her purse. It was an old-lady purse, a grandmother's purse, well-stocked, Laurie thought. Ready for anything. She spied a pack of gum, individually wrapped peppermint pinwheel

mints, a fat wallet, a stash of ballpoints, and the red make-up pencil Annette would need to repair the damage to her crying eyes.

The memorial was for Herman Rosenberg, who had sung "Freiheit" decades earlier, as a member of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, that assembly of anti-fascists who had gone to fight Franco. His son took the podium to deliver the eulogy, pointing to the enlarged photo of his father as a young man, posing with his fellow soldiers and an American flag.

"Premature anti-fascists," the son said. "The war before the good war."

The mourners were aging brigadistas and internationalistas, as well as survivors of other battles, like Malcolm, whose tattoo was visible on one forearm, numbers stained blue when he rolled up his sleeves. The first time they'd met, Malcolm had advised Laurie that everyone needed to belong to a brigade or liberation front at least once. Malcolm offered loads of advice.

That night, almost a year ago, the volunteer crew had prepared a fundraising appeal for bulk mailing: folding letters, stuffing envelopes, sealing, stamping, and addressing. After watching Laurie fold and refold the appeal letter, Malcolm had pointed out the space between paragraphs that she could use as a natural measure. It was right below the sentence: If we don't speak out for El Salvador, for Elba Ramos, her daughter and the six Jesuit priests, who will?

"This one's yours, I guess, isn't it?" he asked. "Your liberation front. Everyone needs one." Malcolm nodded toward the emblem printed on the letterhead: a dove with an olive branch in its beak flying over a map of a tiny country. In his voice, she could hear what her grandmother might call the old country.

Laurie did not want to confess that this liberation front was not hers, nor this church, that she didn't belong to anything or anyone but was here only to perform community service, a deal with a judge and attorneys and the DA, an impossible number of hours to be served. This was the consequence of poor choices involving alcohol and drugs, and even poorer choices involving a car she could no longer drive even if it could be driven, even if it was hers. It was why she took the bus. Or walked. Resided in a so-called halfway house which was exactly halfway between the church and her old high school. Showed up at the church for AA meetings and unfolded the chairs and set up the coffee urns. Two regular, one decaf. Lots of sugar. Then she stayed to fold up the chairs after and pour what was left of the hot coffee in the gutter, watching it steam into the night as it ran down the

appropriately named Hill Street. This was why she folded the endless appeal letters in thirds without complaint and moistened the glue on the envelopes. She didn't read them. Didn't think twice about the dove. Didn't really want to think.

Despite his age, Malcolm had muscular forearms, deeply tanned. It wasn't too hard to see the tattooed numerals, half hidden in the thinning thicket of the gray hair there. Her own tattoos crawled up her pale arms and shoulders, danced across her back, an incoherent circus. Tiger. Monkey. Lion. Peacock. Camel. Seal. A murder of crows. A smiling dolphin swimming under a rainbow. An impulse-driven dragon that a cute guy had talked her into getting. He'd gotten one too and, for a short time, they were a couple. But that was over now. She had to get her act together. She was twenty-five.

Annette admired them all, as if Laurie had drawn them herself. "Which one was first, dear?" she'd asked that night, when they were still strangers.

Laurie pointed to her right ankle, exposed in a flat sandal. Hello Kitty, fat-headed, pink-bowed, mindless and friendly. Fat paw waving.

"Ooooh," Annette responded. "Adorable."

"Do you really like them?" She felt she could ask Annette anything. After all, no one here knew who Laurie was. Her own grandmother winced whenever she caught sight of the tattoos. And her mother had told her she pretended her daughter's menagerie was temporary and would one day disappear. Her father, the psychologist, who had left when Laurie was a child, dryly congratulated her on finding the one thing that would drive her mother crazy forever. "The permanence is what's truly brilliant," he said. "I wish I would have thought of it."

Laurie looked around for the minister who signed her timesheet. Everyone referred to him as Jim. She couldn't do that, even though he had gently corrected her when she had used the term Father. Now, she called him sir or Minister Jim. He was also the mayor of the sleepy coastal city. This had been news to her even though she'd lived here all her life. It explained, perhaps, why she had been assigned here, to this church. No doubt it was a favor for her parents—who, she had begun to appreciate since the accident, were people of some social standing, of some power. Dad, the shrink; Mom, the restaurateur. A deal must have been struck. Minister Jim usually supervised the assembly line on the collapsible card tables: folders, stuffers, labelers, closers, and stampers; troubleshooting and anticipating needs for more envelopes or labels; sometimes kneeling in front of the cantankerous

copy machine to extract a stubborn misfeed or refill the paper supply. Occasionally he played pinball on the Dolly Parton-themed machine that stood like an improbable altar in between a tall bookcase filled with old hymnals and a squat metal file cabinet.

The pinball machine was a great mystery to Laurie. How had it been carried up the church's narrow interior stairway? She wondered about the place of such a thing in a minister's office. Of course, there was the wonder of Dolly herself, with her trademark blonde voluptuousness, resplendent in a revealing yellow pantsuit. When the machine was on, when the tokens dropped into the slot, the singer glowed. Laurie hoped Dolly would sing, but it was just a game, a single silver ball triggering buzzers and bells and lights. Pinball Dolly was lush and blank, and when Laurie played, as she did at least once, almost every day—free, after all—she saw her own faint reflection superimposed on the singer: slender, darker, pale skin scrambling with inky beasts.

"I'm glad you could make Herman's service, dear," Annette remarked when the singing was over and they were stacking chairs. "He liked you so, you know? You reminded him of his Millie. The way you laughed at his terrible jokes."

Laurie didn't have the heart to tell Annette that she was on the clock, following orders, here not for Herman but for the hours served. After clean-up, she'd bring her timesheet to Minister Jim and have him sign off, another two hours subtracted from what she owed the state.

*

The school bus Laurie had T-boned had been empty except for the bus driver, who looked like he'd seen his fair share of drunk drivers and accidents. The last of the students he'd dropped off saw the whole thing, standing on the corner of Hollister and Fourth. They were witnesses, not that witnesses were needed. It had happened in broad daylight, as people said. The people in the corner liquor store or the pocket park were more than enough to testify that the car had slammed into the school bus without so much as braking, and then ricocheted into the boundary wall. Laurie was lucky, the bus driver told her, even before the paramedics arrived to extract her from her vehicle with the jaws of life. But Laurie didn't feel lucky. The car (not hers) was totaled. She was holding. She was under the influence.

For some time after, she could make out the sinister streaks on the cinderblock wall where, after hitting the bus, the car had slammed, skidded, and come to rest. She thought of it as the shadow of the accident, as if the event had cast its own mark through speed and scratch and heat. Then, one day it was painted over, just like that.

Gone. Forgotten. Or maybe forgiven, Laurie hoped.

*

This is how Laurie saw it: she had so many hours of community service. Too many! And she had those twelve steps to climb. Both could be achieved in the same place, the Methodist church. Here she was, upstairs or down, nearly every day and night of the week. When she wasn't stuffing envelopes upstairs with people who could be her grandparents—if her grandparents had been aging Commies and leftists and old hippies—she was downstairs in a dreary circle with the AA crowd and the NA crew.

Laurie's sponsor, Ivette, had begun to press Laurie gently to open up, intercepting her as she set up the coffee and unpacked the enormous blue tin of Danish sugar cookies, stacked in their crinkled paper cups, as yellow and swirly as Pinball Dolly. Laurie's shares always ended with the yellow school bus and her friend's father's Mustang and that cinderblock wall. The bump of the curb, the crack of the axle, the shearing of the tires.

"Tonight," Ivette said, "tell us more. Not just the story that brought you here. If you're like us, and you know you are, you have other stories, stories you need to tell. It will help."

Ivette applied lipstick and dressed up, as if going to a meeting was a big deal. Laurie knew all about her because Ivette had laid it all out: the broken marriage, the three kids taken from her. Even as adults, they didn't speak to her. Something about cashing in her daughter's U.S. savings bonds for drugs. Wasn't the car, the bus, the wall enough? Laurie knew how to tell that story. It did the job.

The early arrivals were filing in, before the coffee had begun to perk. Some waited outside, smoking. What else could she offer up? At the time of the accident, she'd had cocaine in a tiny aluminum foil envelope tucked inside her sock. A quarter gram. She got away with it somehow, trapped in the car, peeling off shoes and socks with her toes so she could emerge barefoot. How about the high school English teacher who, instead of bust-

ing her for the stash in her reading folder, confiscated her kit? Mr. Morrison. She could remember seeing him suddenly still behind his desk, his carefully tended afro backlit from the afternoon sun through the classroom window, watching her discover what was gone. Two months from graduation. Was he trying to save her? Or did he want it for himself? The matches, the foil, the straw, the crumbly brown powder. She graduated, walked across that stage. Mr. Morrison shook her hand, wished her well. Most of her stories were about getting away with it. But you weren't supposed to tell stories that didn't have regret. Laurie understood that much.

"I'll try," she told Ivette. But she didn't mean it. That night, she told the story as she always had.

*

Getting away with things was a hard habit to break. Laurie was good at it, and it had worked for her so far. Minister Jim pointed this out one night as she waited for him to finish her weekly paperwork. He took his time. The previous week he had caught her trying to double dip, a phrase she hadn't heard before. He accused her of attempting the miracle of bilocation, which only five Catholic saints had ever demonstrated, and then proceeded to tell her about all five. These stories of being in two places at once were surprisingly boring. If she could be in two places at once, she would do a better job. Minister Jim's favorite was Isidore, the patron saint of farmworkers, who had appeared in the field working the harvest at the same time he was seen in church.

Laurie hadn't thought Minister Jim would notice that she had claimed to be in twelve-step meetings at the same time she was also upstairs with Malcolm and Annette and the premature anti-fascist battalion stuffing envelopes for justice. So she sat in his tiny office while he examined her entries and tallied up hours and made her talk. He was good at that.

Minister Jim's office was like his pinball machine. Unexpected. He could have chosen the larger space on the second floor with the big windows but instead he allowed the local peace and justice organizations to work there. His office looked like a large storage closet, but it was large enough for what he needed: a desk, a bookcase, a few chairs. Spare. Monk-like. The wood-paneled walls made it warm instead of oppressive. So did he. Even when he was scolding, his round, suntanned face beamed hope. He was a

man of faith, after all. Laurie sat and waited. She had no choice.

"I don't understand what you have to get away with," he was saying. He had finished signing the forms but had placed them on his desk and folded his hands on top.

"This is where you tell me that I had everything growing up, right? That I still do?"

He waited. When he smiled, his face grew rounder, sun-like. Ivette had told her Minister Jim was a surfer. That he took the short walk with his board from the rectory to the waves at least twice a week. This explained the tan, the sun-bleached but thinning hair, and the laid back attitude, but Laurie thought it was too much. Minister? Mayor? Surfer? How many things could one person be?

"You should talk to my parents. You know my parents, don't you?" Her voice was a petulant whine, as if she were a kid. She was embarrassed. Where did that come from?

Jim sighed a bit theatrically, or maybe he was tired. "This isn't about your parents," he told her. "This is about you. My relationship here is with you. It's not about the numbers." He looked down at the papers, then back at her. "It's about what the time here is doing for you."

"I am doing everything I'm told," she said steadily. The bare walls of the office were now bothering her. There was nothing to look at. Maybe that's why he kept it like this. She arched her ankle and looked down. Hello Kitty waved. Mute.

"But you're still trying to get away with it, aren't you? Instead of getting with it. You're just doing what you've always done."

"I'm sober," she responded. "I am clean. Two months."

"Because they test you," he said evenly. "You pee into a cup while someone listens outside the door. You can't get away with anything there, not yet. But this?" He pointed at the paper again. "My church. My word."

Laurie tried to imagine him in the water, black neoprene suit and surfboard. He possessed the kind of confident patience required to wait out natural forces, to read the waves. He was, she thought, trying to read her also. Maybe she too was a wave.

"I hear you surf," she said.

"I do," he said. "For fun." He was smiling again, just like that. "What do you do for fun?"

Her silence was longer and deeper than she intended or he expected. Ly-

ing would have been quicker; it always was. "Your pinball machine," she said finally. "The Dolly Parton. That's fun."

"I agree," he said. He was pleased. "Anything else?"

She was thinking now. "I like pouring out the hot coffee in the street after meeting," she admitted.

This seemed to impress him. "Anything else?"

She remembered Annette's interest in her tattoos, Herman's pleasure in having made her laugh.

"Can I go now?" she asked. "It will not be fun if I miss my bus."

"You may," he said, handing over the papers. "Have fun."

*

It was a busy Wednesday night. Minister Jim was downtown, heading up a special city task force meeting on homelessness. "I'm putting you in charge," he joked as he left. Laurie knew he'd be back to lock up, but she liked that they were still joking. Al-Anon was downstairs, and upstairs the SANE/Freeze monthly membership mailer was in the works. This mailing came with a special refrigerator magnet featuring Mahatma Gandhi reclining next to a surfboard. "Wipeout War," it read. The magnet required an extra stamp. One more step in the process. Annette and Malcolm were folding and stuffing and Herman and Laurie had been sealing and stamping. That evening, Herman told a story Laurie had not heard. It was about his mother, who hadn't wanted him to fight in Spain and so had hidden his passport. Herman got another one, applying under his mother's maiden name. "I showed her," he said, cackling. "I showed the government, too."

Usually Laurie just listened but this night she was thinking. Maybe it was the magnetic Gandhi. "But here you are," she said, "working for a peace group. How does that work?"

She really wanted to know.

"I was working for peace then, too," Herman said. "Trying to stop a bigger war."

"Did you?" As soon as she was finished, she realized she didn't know what she was asking, that she might have gone too far.

Everyone was quiet. Malcolm and Herman exchanged looks. Annette kept folding letters. They could hear voices from below. Someone was complaining loudly about their father: "I never had a real conversation with that bas-

tard. Not one."

"We did what we could," Herman said, sliding a sealed envelope her way.

"That's all you can do," Annette added.

"How old were you?" Laurie asked.

"So many questions!" Annette laughed. "After all this time, she finally talks?"

Laurie blushed.

"Twenty-one," Herman said. "Younger than you."

The good feeling returned. Soon, they finished the first run and as they waited for the next stack from the printer, Laurie slid a token into Dolly, who brightened up right away.

At first, Laurie imagined she had made the machine tilt with one too many bumps of her hip. She was juggling a multi-ball play, hoping to cradle the first ball with one flipper and use a roll shot with the other flipper to ricochet the second ball into a jackpot which would trigger, she anticipated, another extra ball. Then she would just keep feeding them one by one into the jackpot. She hoped to catapult her score into the Top Ten which was currently dominated by Minister Jim. But then, as the vibrations increased, Dolly dimmed. The flippers stilled and the lights went out. The tremors became sharper, stronger. People shouted but the roar of the quaking earth was too loud, like a train had turned down Hill Street heading for the shore.

When it was over, the darkness in the two-story wood-framed church was total. Laurie, who had dropped to her knees and huddled under a table, followed Malcolm as he directed them to the stairwell. "Crawl," he ordered and she did. She heard Annette scrambling in front of her, and once they reached the first floor, she could see by the moonlight shining in the windows. Annette was dragging her purse, but she was barefoot. No doubt the sandals she always kicked off under the table were still upstairs. Laurie could hear the barking of dogs, a distant chorus of car alarms. The Al-Anon folks crowded around the entrance as if eager to resume their meeting. "It isn't safe," Malcolm declared, his voice bold in the darkness. She and everyone else followed him into the street.

Inside the old church, Laurie feared the world outside had crumbled and that she might have to crawl to the halfway house through streets of rubble, but now that she was out in it, she could see that the world was beautifully intact. She could even hear, she imagined, the waves crashing at the

beach. A sense of post-earthquake giddiness was already beginning to ripple through the people milling in the middle of Hill Street.

This would be one of those quakes, notable but not disastrous. Not like, say, Loma Prieta, which had happened last year, or the Sylmar quake of her childhood, which had sloshed the water from their backyard pool. This would be a respectable quake. Its modest casualties would mostly be flukes. Later, everyone would have an earthquake story. Hers would be the Dolly Parton pinball machine and the old lefties she shook, rattled, and rolled with, before crawling after them on her knees.

When the earth rumbled again, someone shouted with a kind of glee: "Aftershock!"

"Stay out of the building," Malcolm shouted. "It is not safe."

Laurie saw Annette fish band-aids from her purse and offer them to Ivette, who was sitting on the curb watching blood run down her long bare shin from a gash on her knee.

"Can I help?" Laurie asked.

"I think we're fine here, dear," Annette said. "But have you seen Herman?"

Laurie looked around and saw he was not where she would expect him to be, huddled with the smokers on the corner, listening to their stories. Herman was like that; he took an interest in people. Had he been in front of her as they scuttled down the stairs? Or had he been behind? Then she realized Herman hadn't been anywhere, that she had not heard his thick Queens accent in the darkness or the aftermath. By now, he should be making jokes.

Malcolm called her name as she ran back into the church, but Laurie didn't stop.

*

The earthquake didn't kill Herman. Laurie found him pinned under the hymnal bookcase, ready with a joke about the fate of an atheist Jew stuck in a collapsing church. It wasn't a good joke, but at least he made the effort.

No, it was those cigarettes that killed Herman, not long after the temblor, just as his wife Millie had always warned. The day of his service, Laurie stayed late, sweeping up, pouring the leftover coffee down the gutter. Annette and Malcolm offered to help, but she waved them off and watched as they made their way to the beach in time for the sunset. She dumped the

ice from the drink coolers into the planter beds, spreading it out gently with her hands. Herman, smoking on the corner, had once suggested this when he saw her poised to throw the contents of an ice bucket in the street. "Ice now, water later," he said. "Think about it. The plants will thank you."

She had smirked then, but she didn't do so now. Melting into the parched soil, the crushed ice glittered. Her hands were cold, clean.

When it was time to go, she didn't climb the stairs to Minister Jim's office to get her paperwork signed even though she knew he was there. She could hear the pinball machine: Ding, ding, ding. A jackpot. Laurie just walked home, song sheet folded carefully in her pocket as if she might try to sing it again.

The earthquake would eventually have a name. As it turned out, it belonged to the desert, where casualties were high. Its name came later, from a place, a dusty distant point of origin. Like the wars that don't have names until the fighting is over and people finally figure out what they are fighting for and where and why.

POETRY

# "Self-Portrait in the Dark," "Meditation on Communication," "Meditation on Revision," "Meditation on Transmutation"

*Dean Rader*

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**SELF-PORTRAIT IN THE DARK**
Cy Twombly, "Night Watch"

We have been out in the woods again,
always, it seems,
searching for the future.

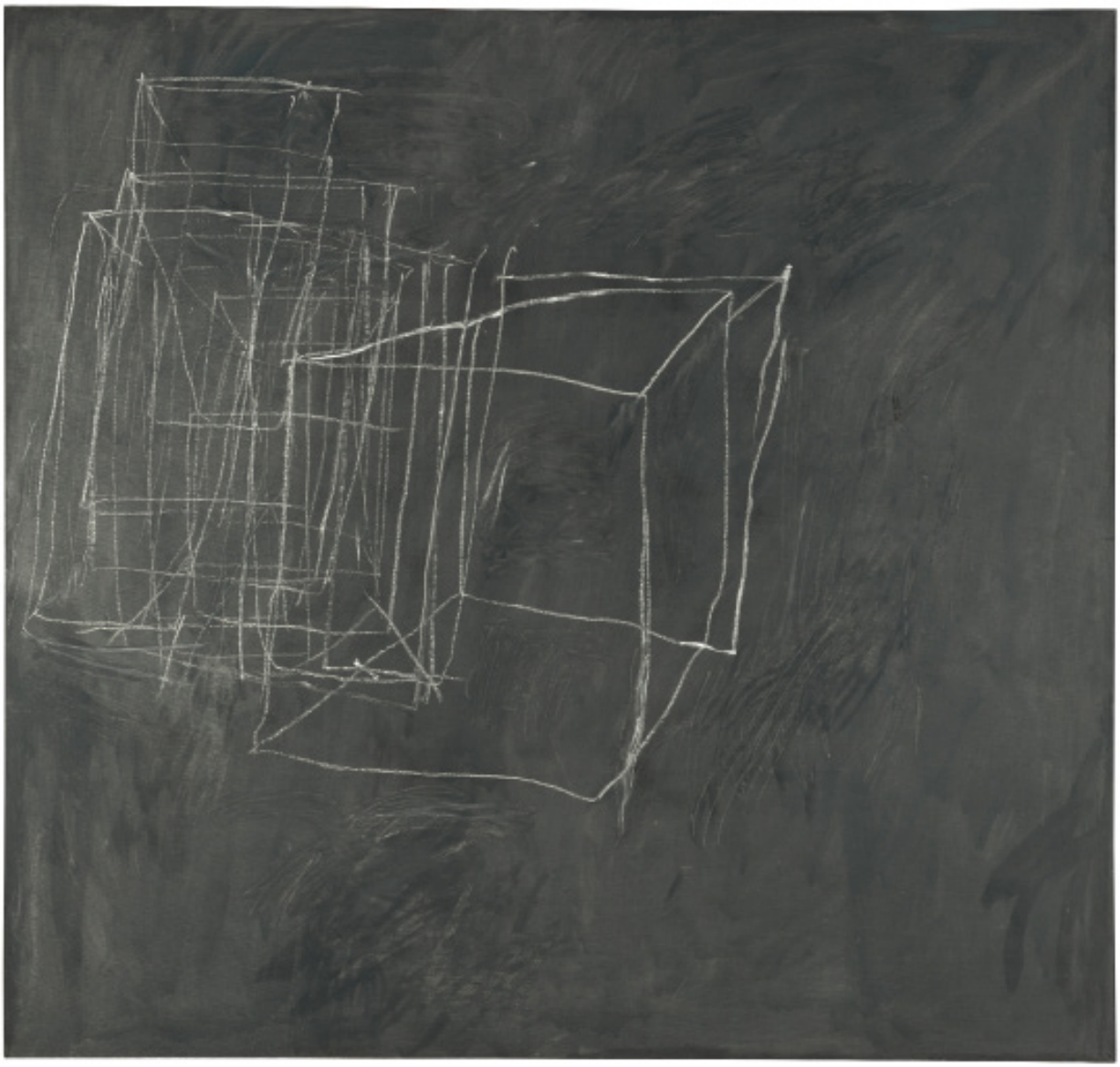
Twombly in a helmet with a little light on the front.
The tree-tips black scribbles against a blacker ground.

Ahead, the path is coal-colored,
cold as a cave and about as useless.

Whatever is on the end of my leash
is tugging me into the brush.

The growls stop,
the full moon a mic-drop in the darkness.

The stage is set, brighter self,
time to walk out alone.



Cy Twombly, “Night Watch” 1966 [Rome], oil based house paint, wax crayon on canvas, 200 x 252 cm / 78 ¾ x 99 ¼ in., courtesy of Galerie Karsten Greve Köln, Paris, St. Moritz. © Cy Twombly Foundation. Photo: Jochen Littkemann

Cy Twombly, "Untitled" 2008, courtesy of the Department of Culture and Tourism - Abu Dhabi Photo APF, © Cy Twombly Foundation

## MEDITATION ON COMMUNICATION

Cy Twombly, "Untitled"

Dear Cy –

And why wouldn't I go
like language
to where
I am not blue scrim
of sky and sea
calligraphy of memory
cataract
not illustration but realization
rhythm

wave
cascade—

Have you seen the now, Cy?

You would not
could never—

The sky sun scorched
fire & more fire

black as a bruise but not as soft

I think even oceans
are burning
or melting
everything molting
from what it was
to what it is
going to be—
tonight my son
asked what my weird super
power would be and I said
to walk into
a painting
so why wouldn't I?
Cy?
into
it/you go
among the blue trace of
the almost
of my name
murmur of the visual—
you have to me written so
why
how could I not become
the blue

sky-skinned sea
skinned,
my body a choir of bird-song
ready to light up with the
glowing wheel of alteration so that we may see
far enough ahead to go
to go
that blue it is beyond blue
the way this life
is beyond all things coming directly toward so why not among
the cataracts lit by the light of not language but its shadow
its shell as
though it too is burned
through
to bone—
go?
I have driven
through flame
this is not metaphor
and yet
it is language or at least
its shell
its scorch mark marked look
at my skin,
Cy, I am as blue
as the iris behind Death's black patch

blue as the sky when it changes to sea go?
I am
already
there

Cy Twombly, "Mars and the Artist" 1975, © Cy Twombly Foundation

## MEDITATION ON REVISION

Cy Twombly, "Mars and the Artist"

All abstraction is a form of incompletion—

all incompletion an ~~exit to~~ emptiness.

Nothing can be said ~~enough times.~~

All writing is a form of silence—

all painting ~~an access to~~ blindness—

To those who ask, god reveals ~~himself through~~ absence,

~~to those who do not~~ he stays silent.

Still, we ~~hear the red~~ bleed ~~blue~~.


Cy Twombly, "Untitled (hang iambics)" 1989, © Cy Twombly Foundation

## MEDITATION ON TRANSMUTATION

Cy Twombly, "Untitled (Hang iambics)"

To circulate there:
to master the descent into disorder—

*(this is no time for poetry)*

to dissolve into a map
of your own making—

*(hang iambics)*

an internal orbit of excess—
orphic and oceanic all at once,

*(~~this is no~~ time for poetry)*

both vortex and veil:
chaos + pattern = the possible

POETRY

# “Du bout de la pensée,” “Andante Emascu-lata,” “Adante con scratchy”

*Alina Stefanescu*

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## “DU BOUT DE LA PENSÉE”

I told you what I know about citizens,
the prestige of innocence, the blue passports
resembling our neighbor’s rain barrels. She is
diligent in saving things from the sky.
On her porch, two plastic ficus stay green,
stay dry, regardless. She waters them
with her mind, that hole where the dead
look alive in mint nylon. Instrumentalists keep
me awake with their musings. Traditionally,
the traitor carries a parcel past dead plants,
statues, the agitprop of prosperity. I lie
my hope with the progressive vivacity
of t-shirt ideology. The cow has a bell
the eye fashions immanence.

*Erik Satie. “Gnossiennes No. 1.” On the edge of an idea.*

## “ANDANTE EMASCULATA”

My heart can’t tell the sun from his
cymbal. Alina eats twigs after noon has baked
them. The sky is a microwave oven. Alina is
the problem for his extended family. His cousin
says vampire variant. His uncle says speckled
Slavic hen, baby Soviet. His aunt said Slavs
done gone been their slaves in the old world.
I’m still the alien you flagged back in
high school. Alina is the fake one, the hired
drum teaching retirees to dance in rubber pants.
Whatever she touches grows molars
and turns into mud. I said mud: everywhere.
We could wrestle in it but Alina eats
fungi. My saliva salvages and salves.

*Charles Ives. “String Quartet No. 2,” second movement played by second violin. Slowly in an emasculated way.*

## "ANDANTE CON SCRATCHY (AS TUNING UP)"

Sun
with teeth, we say
in Romanian, of
days with warm lips
that mask frozen
tongues.

The
left behind-ling
no one called me

among children who
wait, an infant
gets stuck between
the desk & the dream
of running.

I was crawling,
exploring a homeland
with bitty knees

as mama slipped
jewelry into folded
coat pockets,
buried two lives

in one suitcase.

*Charles Ives. "String Quartet No. 2," third movement to designate a brief, open-string pause. Slowly, like scratchy.*

POETRY

# “How to Disappear in America,” “39,” “God of War in the Coin Laundry”

*Michelle Franke*

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HOW TO DISAPPEAR IN AMERICA
—after Alec Soth

become a palette
of slight variation

early woods are ash, balsam, fawn

pocket pussy, a shiv
broom handle, leather strap, glass

let’s make this easy

blood holds the dirt
to the blade

or is it the other way?
this time of year

oaks drop

their leaves completely

i want to be a small thing
come winter

inventory: toilet paper, vaseline, power strip, scissors

hard to see, built into
the mountain

specter of home

white bulb, wool blanket
inside the book, a key

laundry line
beneath a gray sky

means we don't have much time

desert without beginning or end
has no choice

but to reckon with a body
with anything

broken down, dragged out
to the sage steppe

only mustangs approach
the school bus now

that yellow
mixed in 1939

meant to be
hard to ignore

you might be curious
what I remember

about that house

all I can say is
when i left

i made every
soft thing cower

at my foot
beg forgiveness

39

i was wondering how much
i had left of anything
trying on numbers

like coats maybe forty
more birthdays asking myself
how does that make you feel?

when the rain stopped
we saw a double rainbow
out our kitchen window

it was st. patrick's day
and you were three years old
we didn't know

what was going to happen
inside a shuttering city
hospital ship days from port

but we did what we could
went outside and ran
laughing, picking up sticks

tapping on phone poles
what sound does this make?
chain link, tree trunk

we cut green shamrocks
made cardboard binoculars
to hunt leprechauns

who'd dropped coins
all over our house
that was me, of course

room to room hiding
gold paper circles
on my hands and knees

no surprise when i was a girl
nothing hurt more
than trying and coming up short

time was boundless
before but now
will i know the last night i hold you?

your sleep voice half in this world
says i'll miss you by the dark, mama

no one could ever say we lost everything

## GOD OF WAR IN THE COIN LAUNDRY

maybe someone
spilled wine

wet the bed
there could be

an interview
this week

and a broken
dryer at home

turns out
we are all

brought to
our knees

by apartment living
so here he is

Ares checking
his wallet his car

for cash
every possible place

for a few bills
just enough

to make change
before lifting the lid

wondering
how much

a washing machine
can take

making the choice
between hot warm cold

and waiting

next to me
on the bench

we listen to water
fill the drum

it takes a long time

he's checking his phone
like a farmer

checks a field
little nods

fighting in the ranks
virus clusters
stocks tumble

he's eating creatine bars
iron supplements

he's that guy

i don’t want to ask
but i’m thinking

everything is
going according

to plan now
he looks proud

all machines
are circling and groaning

through one window
we can see slosh

it’s dizzying
and then

some toy man
who’d hidden

in a pocket
appears

in the swell
arms up, dead eyes

pushed to the glass
and then another

the figures
get close enough

to touch
for a moment

it looks like
they're holding hands

a woman passing by
doesn't notice

but says excuse me
her laundry cart

wheel squeaks
under weight

he says to me
wow

this place
it will just

break your heart

POETRY

# Smoothing Stone

*Robert Krut*

In the river it is always night.
Lay flat, breathe by drowning.
Under the water, you can't see the land on fire.
Become the river's lung.

Don't say a prayer, become a prayer.
Lower yourself without help.
There is no gravity inside the river.
Each pebble is another moon.

There is moss, there is a blanket for rest.
The river is dark and the river is cold.
Each pebble beneath you cools the hillside heat.
Understand this bed levitates.

A water snake curls across your torso.
You are an animal, a creature who inhales water.
Your fingers are ten parades of pebbles.
Drown your hands under the water and silt.

The fire is without gravity, it is hair in wind.
It inhales you, it exhales you.
Stay still, and drink the water with your lungs.

Smoke is reflected on the river, smoke reflects the river.

It is always night in the river.
It pulls you to its mouth, the moon's mouth.
A pebble in your pocket, your skull smoothed by water.
You are stone and you are current.

COLLABORATIONS

# M'boitatá

Karen Tei Yamashita, Ronaldo Oliveira, Ana Maria Seara

Disclaimer

A parrot told me the following fabula. This parrot claimed to be the descendant of two Amazon parrots, discovered by Alexander von Humboldt in 1799, who continued to speak the dead language of the extinct Maipure people. I calculate my parrot informant to be of the fifth generation of this illustrious couple. Of the pair, one parrot was left behind in Brazil; a single parrot, she continued to nurture her young brood on the abundance of the forest: cacao, macaúba, açai, sapoti, Brazil nuts, etc. Meanwhile, her partner was sent away to Prussia to be studied. Von Humboldt, a naturalist, must have known that parrots are monogamous, tied to each other for life, but no, it was determined that the talkative one, which turned out to be the male, should be studied. The blabbermouth was sent away, a dead language captured in his feathered body.

However, in fact, the parrot couple were having a conversation, one completing the thoughts of the other. I later discovered that the silent response of the female was quite simply ironic, as if she were rolling her eyes to demonstrate her disgust or incredulity. In the meantime, her male companion pratered on self-importantly; after all, he would be the one chosen for a

future in Europe. To know the entire story requires both sides, two memories fused into one. Admittedly, despite faithful transmission over five parrot generations, I have worked with this disadvantage, but after years of careful and intimate study, I have been able to interpret one-half of an extinct language, and therefore, one-half of the story. What happened to the other European half, I can only speculate, but I am told that the deciphering of the captured male parrot's babble was undoubtedly the foundation for the structural linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure. One imagines that the solitary male parrot died piteously in some dank asylum in Königsberg, squawking unintelligible histrionics; however, his stuffed body, gloriously red-crowned noggin and emerald feathers, is today displayed regally in the Museum für Naturkunde in Berlin.

Admittedly, my original plans were to rediscover on the Brazilian coast the location of Uwattibi where Hans Staden was captive to the cannibal Toppinikin in 1550. One hundred and sixty years later, in 1710, Lemuel Gulliver in the same vicinity would encounter the repulsive Yahoo and the virtuous Houyhnhnm. When I arrived, Uwattibi had been transformed into a tropical hotel resort—turquoise waves, spume-tipped, tickling pristine and bleached sands; bikinied and speedoed bronze bodies rising from tepid waters in slow liquid motion; palm trees with coconuts filled with cachaça, bending as if in offering. True, the Yahoo population continues in various stages of latent evolution and dissipation, but the Houyhnhnm, like the Maipure, are most likely also extinct.

Unable to pay the exorbitant resort prices, not having anticipated a package deal, I ventured on foot up to an altitude of 1,500 meters above sea level into the Mata Atlântica where I fortuitously met the parrot. Living in a thatched mud hut tucked within a hidden valley of flowering anjicas at the effluence of seven natural springs and protected by raucous hives of African bees, I communed with the parrot for the next decade. Indulging on the providence of the forest—mango, banana, guava, caju, amidst the wafting stink of rotting fruit, the result of our exchange follows. As I eventually discerned from careful listening, the parrot was performing in dialogue her half of the story. What I have recuperated here is of course speculative, however confirmed by the parrot herself; that is to say, she would only continue her dialogue with me if my responses were, in her keen discernment, passable.

I am entirely indebted to the parrot's patient and repetitive instruction and fully acknowledge my own incompetence. I have endeavored to translate as fully as possible her story, and any errors are mine alone.

Washington Chateaubriand silva

## Isenção de responsabilidade

Uma papagaia me contou a seguinte fábula. A papagaia se dizia descendente de dois papagaios amazônicos, descobertos por Alexander von Humboldt em 1799, os quais continuavam a falar a língua morta do extinto povo Maipure. Calculei que minha papagaia informante fosse da quinta geração desse casal ilustre. Desse par, a papagaia foi deixada no Brasil; sozinha, ela continuou a cuidar de sua ninhada jovem valendo-se da abundância da floresta: cacau, macaúba, açaí, sapoti, castanhas do Pará, etc. Enquanto isso, seu companheiro foi mandado à Prússia para ser estudado. Von Humboldt, um naturalista, deve ter sabido que os papagaios são monógamos, ligados um ao outro pelo resto da vida; mas não, foi determinado que o papagaio mais falador, o qual mostrou-se ser o macho, deveria ser estudado. O tagarela foi despachado, uma língua morta capturada no seu corpo emplumado.

Contudo, na realidade, o casal de papagaios estava tendo uma conversa, no qual um completava os pensamentos do outro. Mais tarde descobri que a resposta silenciosa da fêmea era muito simplesmente irônica, como se ela estivesse revirando os olhos para demonstrar seu desagrado ou sua incredulidade. Entretanto, seu companheiro macho continuava a papaguear, cheio de si; afinal, ele seria o escolhido para um futuro na Europa. Saber a história inteira requer os dois lados, duas memórias fundidas em uma. Reconheço que, apesar da transmissão fiel por cinco gerações de papagaios, trabalhei com essa desvantagem, mas depois de anos de estudo cuidadoso e aprofundado fui capaz de interpretar a metade de uma língua extinta e portanto, a metade da história. O que aconteceu com a outra metade europeia, só posso especular, mas me foi dito que a decifração do balbucio do papagaio macho capturado, foi, sem dúvida, a formação para

as teorias linguísticas de Ferdinand de Saussure. Imagina-se que o solitário papagaio morreu deploravelmente em algum asilo frio e úmido em Königsberg, grasnando acessos incompreensíveis; contudo, seu corpo empalhado, com sua cabeça gloriosamente coroada de vermelho e suas penas verde-esmeraldas, hoje é exibido soberanamente no Museu für Naturkunde em Berlin.

Francamente, meus planos originais eram redescobrir no litoral brasileiro a localização de Uwattibi, onde Hans Staden foi mantido cativo pelos canibais Tupiniquins em 1550. Cento e sessenta anos mais tarde, em 1710, Lemuel Gulliver, nas mesmas redondezas encontraria os repulsivos Yahoo e os repulsivos Houyhnhnm. Quando cheguei, Uwattibi tinha sido transformada em um hotel resort tropical—ondas turquesa, pontilhadas de espuma, areias alvejadas e pristinas que fazem cócegas; corpos bronzeados em biquínis e sungas emergindo de águas tépidas em movimentos líquidos e de câmera lenta; palmeiras com cocos cheios de cachaça, curvando-se como em oferenda. Com certeza, a população Yahoo continua em vários estágios de evolução latente e dissipação, mas os Houyhnhnm, como os Maipure, estão muito provavelmente extintos também.

Sem condições de pagar os preços exorbitantes do resort e sem ter antecipado um pacote de promoção, eu me aventurei a pé a uma altitude de 1.500 metros acima do nível do mar para dentro da Mata Atlântica onde eu por sorte encontrei a papagaia. Vivendo em uma palhoça de barro e palha enfiada em um vale escondido de anjicas em flor na efluência de quatro fontes naturais e ao lado de colmeias estridentes de abelhas africanas, convivi intimamente com a papagaia pela década seguinte. Aproveitando-nos da providência da floresta—mangas, bananas, goiabas, cajus, em meio ao fedor de fruta podre pairando no ar, o produto da nossa interação é descrito a seguir. Como eu eventualmente discerni ao ouvir atentamente, a papagaia estava executando em diálogo a sua metade da história. O que eu recuperei aqui é obviamente especulativo, todavia confirmado pela própria papagaia informante; ou seja, ela só continuaria seu diálogo comigo se minhas respostas fossem, de acordo com o seu discernimento aguçado, aceitáveis. Tenho uma grande dívida de gratidão por sua instrução paciente e repetitiva e admito completamente minha própria incompetência. Foi minha intenção traduzir o mais completamente possível sua história e quaisquer erros são

meus e de mais ninguém.

Washington Chateaubriand silva

## M'boitatá

Deep in the dark virgin forest, Mother Tongue met Father Penis. Mother Tongue filled the forest with laughing chatter and gutturals. Father Penis, deaf and dumb, slithered round and round, doodling nonsense on the loamy earth, leaving a wake of slime on everything: foliage, butterfly, sloth, fungus, stone.

Mother Tongue savored everything: foliage, butterfly, sloth, fungus, stone.

She crooned and conjectured, what was that additional slimy taste?

Hungry and to light the way, Father Penis ate the eyes of everything: monkey, cicada, frog, toucan, potato.

Mother Tongue, sightless, heard their cries.

Filled with eyeballs, Father Penis became a long luminous sausage.

But blinded, what good is light?

Water dripped to stone. Drip drip drip.

Tatá tatá tatá.

Stone opened a space to water. This took a long, long time.

But what is time?

Time is work.

What work?

I'm a parrot. How should I know?

Lazy creature.

Days, weeks, months, years. Sun days. Moon nights. Rain and flood. Dry and drain.

Tatá tatá tatá.

Water impressed its translucent liquid into stone. Kiss kiss kiss.

Aí, what boring allegorical foreplay. Get on with it.

Okay, okay. But first, a tiny cradle, a hammock, a lovers' nest, had to be made.

A stone basin?

Minimalist and natural.

Uncomfortable, but so Zen.

Father Penis slithered into that stone indentation, a kaleidoscope of shimmering color cascading from above. A beautiful, haunting sight worthy of the colored pencil of Paul Klee.

That? The luminous dick?

Meanwhile Mother Tongue wandered toward the liquid sound:

Tatá tatá tata.

Parched, she thrust herself into the mellifluous cataract. And that was that.

What?

Mother Tongue and Father Penis played in their stone nest. Ah ah hmmm hmmm hmmm ah ah ah AHA! Water and slime. Light and sound. M + Boi / tatá = M'boitatá.

The birth of our hero.

Correction: heroX.

Like LatinX.

Like SeX.

True, this naturally camouflaged child of the forest, M'boitatá, had a black penis and green breasts

(although those little titties would appear much later),

double-jointed appendages that embraced forward and behind, as well as swivel feet pointing forward and back. Baby M'boitatá straddled Mother Tongue's back, their little penis wiggling behind, attentive to a receding world. When Father Penis commanded, follow me, M'boitatá obeyed the direction of their swiveling feet, losing the way in circles, impossible to track.

I thought Father Penis was deaf and dumb.

Ah, but he gesticulated in queer penis sign language.

And M'boitatá?

Apart from or perhaps aided by an eccentric physique, a robust child. Super functional. The birth of song and storytelling.

Oh, another one of those predictable creation myths.

M'boitatá was a prodigy.

Of course.

Spoke in full sentences and complex algorithms at three months. Sang opera in seven languages, anticipating, on harmonica, the haunting repetitive compositions of Villa Lobos and Philip Glass. Interviewed the virgin forest and memorized her memoir. Recreated the last supper of Bishop Sardinha and his thirty companions in a mural intricately employing 100,000 feathers of 1,300 species of tropical birds.

The mural was ephemeral;

the feathers blew away in a hurricane. What a beautiful sight, all those feathers flying into the atmosphere for one last time.

Hey, there are no hurricanes in Brazil.

Okay, the mural, along with 20 million objects, the archeological repository of the South American continent, was destroyed when the National Museum inside Quinta da Boa Vista in Rio de Janeiro burned to the ground.

You lie.

What does it matter?

True, except for us, all those birds are dead or extinct.

Ai, que saudades.

Ai, que preguiça.

You got ahead of the story.

That's because you interrupted my story.

Our story. Continue, please.

M'boitatá, our heroX, found themselves crawling and climbing backwards and forwards, spiraling and circling the great forest, licking and fondling everything in their path. Like Father Penis, with a tiny lantern dick, they scavenged the midnight forest floor.

Like Mother Tongue, deploying echolocation, they spiraled the canopy, bounding in monkey loops and twists, fluttering with birds, following insects up and down, backwards and forwards.

Similarly, they dove into the rivers and flooded forest, ate dropping fruit with tambaqui, followed schools of piranha, hid in the shallows with electric eel. M'boitatá mimicked the movements and life cultures of every living creature, of every living plant that waved, shuddered, or shook in the wind or rain, in growth and death.

M’boitatá, tongue-penis, mimicked, sang, and conversed with every animate and inanimate sound.

M’boitatá, penis-tongue, cajoled, postured, danced, and played, arousing desire in every living thing. Forest imp and trickster, embedded spirit and sentient angel.

But, there must have been a downside. After all, M’boitatá was rather ugly and very clumsy. They didn’t even make a nice-looking bird.

Maybe a good-looking spider?

Do you remember the time M’boitatá tried to weave their shit into a web? What a mess.

M’boitatá ate everybody’s detritus: poop, guano, spider web, shed skin, wing, shell, rot. Scooting around as they did and coming upon the stuff, it was out of curiosity.

Processed food.

To be honest, M’boitatá ate everything and anything, an equal opportunity feeder, an environmental recycler.

Taste tester. Foodie connoisseur. Over-exercised palate. Gourmandism.

Iron chef.

Iron stomach. The forest was its own feast, recycling itself into itself. Exuberant. Extravagant. Overabundant. No one should go hungry. Isn’t this paradise?

No one could go hungry. If you could go hungry, would you be better?

Better what? I’m a parrot. What sort of question is that?

Spit out from the combining genitals of Mother Tongue and Father Penis, baby M'boitatá was so cute, cradled under a constant shower in that perfect nest of stone.

Mother Tongue licked and lullabyed. Father Penis prodded and tickled.

M'boitatá, nestled and nurtured, sucked in sound and sensibility. One day, too big, they fell out of the stone nest, tumbled away, and set forth to discover their world, journeying in the rainy season with the birds, butterflies, monkeys, and fish from place to place and pausing in the dry season to sample one tribal concentration after another.

Nomadic peregrinations, zigzagging the forest, sampling every desire and delight.

One dry season, M'boitatá met AiAi. Maybe it was the shimmering rainbow. She reached through, one bold graceful arm, parting its curtain and appeared, dazzling, the most beautiful creature M'boitatá had ever witnessed.

And to be sure, by this time, they had been everywhere and seen everything.

How had they never run into AiAi?

A mythical being conjured by M'boitatá. A tropical apsara.

Ah, but a shapeshifter to be sure. At night, she returned to her other self.

What other self?

A slow moving, hanging upside-down hairy sloth.

At night, M'boitatá could snuggle into her immense rocking hammock of a body.

AiAi AiAi AiAi.

Short story long, they fell in love.

You mean, they and she fell in love. Takes two to tango.

We don't tango in Brazil.

From that time on, M'boitatá and AiAi peregrinated always together, sharing a nomadic life.

Many years of nomading, communing with every tribe.

All four hundred?

Yanomami, Xipaya, Wariku, Txikao, Sikiama, Saliba, Nutabe, Mayorun, Nanao, Kayapo, Kandoshi, Haumbisa, Duit, Cashibo, Bora, Baniya, Arua, Arabela, Zoe, Yaminawa, Wirina, Wapishana, Tuxinawa, Shuar, Poyanawa, Muiniche, Matis, Madi, Kaxuiana, Jurti, Huachipaeri, Deni, Cara, Baure, Bakairi, Arawak, Apurina, Amuesha, Aikana, Yawanawa, Yabirana, Wayana, Waiai, Tubarão, Shibibo, Pasto, Munduraku, Maco, Kaxarari, Jebero, Hixkaryana, Chayahuita, Capanahua, Bare, Atruahi, Arawa, Apinave, Amarekaeri, Aguaruna, Yawalpiti, Yabaana, Waura, Vilela, Tacana, Sharanahua, Paresi, Mvima, Mrubo, Mchiguenga, Katikina, Irantxe, Guarequena, Chamicuro, Cahuarana, Bara, Ashaninka, Arara, Apalai, Amahuaca, Achuar-Shiwiar, Yaruma, Xiriana, Warao, Urarina, Suruwaha, Saluma, Palikur, Meinaku, Maquiritari, Kuikuro, Kankuamo, Huarayo, Guarani, Cashinahua, Bororo, Baniwa, Aruan, Araona, Ankoke, Akurikyo, Achagua.

One day, M'boitatá and AiAi happened upon a new tribe, the Fraugudomijesu.

They weren't really a tribe.

Not a tribe per se. More like a mocambo of escaped missionaries excommunicated from a theology of liberation.

Liberation?

Liberate the Indians.

What a concept. Then what?

They welcomed the wandering M'boitatá and AiAi into their fold.

Folded in like mashed bananas into vanilla cake batter.

But, fortunately, not baked. They escaped.

I heard they were caught red-handed.

But you can imagine how tempting it must have been to partake of that gorgeous blond body, lying in waxy state under dim lights.

Only if you're an urubu.

What did they eat? The fingers? The toes? The nose? The ears?

Who knows? Maybe the nipples. One each. And then they ran, that tribe of crazies chasing after.

Luckily, it was the crack of dawn, and AiAi turned from nighttime sloth into her visceral flying acrobatic self. They ran like the wind, M'boitatá's feet swiveling this way and that so that their tracks were incomprehensible.

And that pack of liberationists yelling after hysterically and every which way: The body of Jesus! The blood of Jesus!

It was an exciting escape, finally leaping into a tremendous waterfall, riding its resplendent cascade, plummeting, then churning, then floating until beachside.

Beachside in Uwattibi.

Where the Toppinikin had settled strategically in a serene, apparently safe

bay, to catch those unaware explorers, come to colonize the savages.

Little did those explorers know.

Like tourists, they paddled their boats and trinkets into that calm and balmy bay, looking for the red-light district. The Toppinikin got lasciviously naked and greeted those men like they were the first ever with pink skins to arrive in paradise.

It was a trap.

They were treated very humanely. Fed and sexed. Fattened and greased. An organic-only diet. And free-ranged.

There was nowhere else to go.

Why would they want to leave paradise?

But, what about M'boitatá and AiAi?

Oh, they were already brown and naked; they just blended in with the natives.

Uwattibi turned out to be very cosmopolitan.

M'boitatá and AiAi could stroll the outdoor markets, the sweet smoke of barbequed humanity wafting. The vendors called out, invited them to experiment, a tasty morsel of carefully cultivated français, or português, or alemão, or holandês. A mixed skewer, if you please.

Aí que gostoso! What about the indígena?

A little gamey, extremely lean, and a bit stringy, but of course completely multi-natural.

Unlike the sophisticated savor of the fatty foreigner. A carnivore's delight, but it couldn't last.

Maybe it was the export business. Maybe that guy Brillat-Savarin wrote an article, and folks got greedy. Who knows. Before that, everyone was fed and satisfied, a utopian ideal. Then, they desired more.

Phoenix and unicorns. Desire for the mythical.

One day, someone discovered that the beautiful AiAi became a sloth at night. She would be unapproachable in the light, but in the dark, hanging from a tree, she was the slowest creature in the forest. A forest apsara, a changeling. What would it be like to eat such a gorgeous creature?

To eat aphrodisia herself?

M'boitatá and AiAi heard the rumors. They made a plan to escape, but AiAi knew.

After day came night, again and again.

The Toppinikin sent their finest hunters; there would be no escape.

Deep in the forest, M'boitatá croaked and croaked, and hundreds of frogs—yellow, blue, green, red, copper, gold—heard their love call.

AiAi pressed her lips to each phosphorescent frog and sucked out their poisonous glands. Then, at nightfall, she hung lazily, M'boitatá cradled as always in her soft bosom and cozy tummy. They made sweet love and slept. The hunters arrived, unsuspecting of such easy prey. AiAi tumbled to the forest floor, and M'boitatá scampered to the top of the canopy.

Back in Uwatibbi, the hunters were regaled with honors and great ceremony, and AiAi was trussed and recreated into a cuisine extravaganza, a sliver of her poisonous body tasted by everyone.

Her deadly exquisite corpse.

And that is how the entire tribe of the Toppinikin vanished from the face

of the earth.

Heartbroken, M'boitatá wandered in a direction divined to be home. Over time—their lifetime, dripping water had carved a larger nest into the stone basin birthplace.

M'boitatá curled into that smooth slippery bowl and waited.

Waited for the dissolution of stone and self.

Tatá tatá tatá.

Fim.

**M'boitatá**

No fundo da floresta virgem e escura, Mãe Língua conheceu Pai Pênis. Mãe Língua encheu a floresta com falas animadas, risos e sons guturais. Pai Pênis, surdo e mudo, serpenteava em círculos, fazendo desenhos sem sentido na terra argilosa, deixando um rastro de lodo em tudo: folhagem, borboleta, preguiça, fungo, pedra.

Mãe Língua saboreava tudo: folhagem, borboleta, preguiça, fungo, pedra. Ela cantarolava e conjecturava: o que era mesmo esse gosto viscoso extra?

Faminto e de forma a iluminar o caminho, Pai Pênis comia os olhos de tudo: macaco, cigarra, rã, tucano, batata.

Mãe Língua, cega, ouvia seus gritos.

Cheio de globos oculares, Pai Pênis se transformou em uma comprida linguiça luminosa.

Mas sem visão, para que serve a luz?

A água pingava na pedra. Pinga pinga pinga.

Tatá tatá tatá.

A pedra abriu um espaço para a água. Isso levou muito muito tempo.

Mas o que que é o tempo?

O tempo é trabalho.

Que trabalho?

Eu sou uma papagaia. Como é que vou saber?

Criatura preguiçosa.

Dias, semanas, meses, anos. Dias de sol. Noites de lua. Chuva e enchente. Seca e drenagem.

Tatá tatá tatá.

A água imprimiu seu líquido translúcido na pedra. Beijo beijo beijo.

Ai, que amassos alegóricos chatos. Continua logo.

Tudo bem. Mas antes, um bercinho, uma rede, um ninho para amantes teria que ser feito.

Uma bacia de pedra?

Minimalista e natural.

Desconfortável, mas tão Zen.

Pai Pênis deslizou para dentro daquele entalhe da pedra, um caleidoscópio de cores cintilantes caindo em cascata desde o topo. Uma visão assustadora e linda, digna do lápis colorido de Paul Klee.

Aquilo? O pau luminoso?

Enquanto isso, Mãe Língua vagueava em direção ao som líquido:

Tatá tatá tatá.

Ressequida, ela se jogou na catarata melíflua. E assim foi.

O quê?

Tatá tatá tatá.

Mãe Língua e Pai Pênis brincaram no seu ninho de pedra. Ah ah hum hum hum ah ah ah AHA! Água e lodo. Luz e som. M + Boi / tatá = M'boitatá.

O nascimento de nosso herói.

Correção: heroX.

Como LatinX.

Como SeX.

É verdade, essa criança naturalmente camuflada da floresta, M'boitatá, tinha um pênis preto e seios verdes

(embora aquelas maminhas só aparecessem muito mais tarde),

apêndices duplamente articulados que abraçavam pela frente e por trás, além de pés giratórios que apontavam para frente e para trás. O bebê M'boitatá montava as costas da Mãe Língua, seu pequeno pênis se sacudindo atrás, atento a um mundo que retrocedia. Quando Pai Pênis ordenava: siga-me, M'boitatá obedecia a direção de seus pés giratórios, perdendo-se em círculos, impossível de rastrear.

Eu pensei que Pai Pênis era surdo e mudo.

Ah, ele gesticulava em linguagem de sinais peniana queer.

E M'boitatá?

Apesar de, ou talvez auxiliado por um físico excêntrico, uma criança robusta. Superfuncional. A origem da música e da contação de histórias.

Ah, mais um desses mitos de criação previsíveis.

M'boitatá era um prodígio.

Mas, é óbvio.

Falava em frases completas e algoritmos complexos aos três meses. Cantava óperas em sete línguas, antecipando, na gaita, as composições repetitivas e assustadoras de Villa Lobos e Philip Glass. Entrevistou a floresta virgem e decorou suas memórias. Recriou a última ceia do Bispo Sardinha e seus trinta companheiros em um mural, intricadamente empregando 100.000 penas de 1.300 espécies de pássaros tropicais.

O mural foi efêmero;

as penas voaram em um furacão. Que linda visão, todas aquelas penas voando pela atmosfera pela última vez.

Epa, não há furacões no Brasil.

Tudo bem, o mural, junto com 20 milhões de objetos, o repositório arqueológico do continente sul-americano, foi destruído quando o Museu Nacional na Quinta da Boa Vista no Rio de Janeiro foi reduzido a cinzas em um incêndio.

Mentira.

Qual é a diferença?

É verdade, exceto por nós, todos aqueles pássaros estão mortos ou extintos.

Ai, que saudades.

Ai, que preguiça.

Você se adiantou à história.

Foi porque você interrompeu a minha história.

Nossa história. Continue, por favor.

M'boitatá, nosso heróiX, se viram rastejando e trepando para frente e para trás, em espirais e círculos pela grande floresta, lambendo e acariciando tudo em seu caminho. Como Pai Pênis, com um pinto como uma minilanterna, vasculharam o solo da floresta noturna.

Como Mãe Língua, utilizando a ecolocalização, escalaram em espiral o dossel da floresta, saltando em acrobacias e guinadas de macacos, esvoaçando com os pássaros, seguindo insetos para cima e para baixo, para frente e para trás.

Da mesma forma, mergulharam nos rios e nas florestas alagadas, comeram frutas caídas com tambaqui, seguiram cardumes de piranhas, se esconderam nas águas rasas com as enguias elétricas. M'boitatá imitou os movimentos e culturas de todas as criaturas vivas, de todas as plantas que ondularam, estremeceram, ou se agitaram no vento ou na chuva, no florescimento ou na morte.

M'boitatá, língua-pênis, imitou, cantou e conversou com todos os sons animados e inanimados.

M'boitatá, pênis-língua, persuadiu, fez pose, dançou e tocou, provocando o desejo em todos as coisas viventes. Moleque e malandro, espírito incorporado e anjo sensível.

Mas, deve ter havido algum aspecto negativo. Afinal, M'boitatá era meio feio e muito desengonçado. Nem sequer pareciam um passarinho bonito.

Quem sabe uma aranha bonita?

Você se lembra da vez quando M'boitatá tentou trançar uma teia com suas fezes? Que sujeira.

M'boitatá comia o detrito de todo mundo: cocô, guano, teia de aranha, pele descascada, asa, concha, putrefação. Vasculhando como faziam e dando com essas coisas, era por curiosidade.

Comida processada.

Com toda honestidade, M'boitatá comia tudo e qualquer coisa, um comedor sem discriminação, um reciclador ambiental.

Provador de sabores. Gastronômico e connoisseur. Palato hiperexercitado. Gastronomismo.

Iron Chef.

Estômago de ferro. A floresta era seu próprio banquete, reciclando-se em si mesma.

Exuberante. Extravagante. Superabundante. Ninguém deve ficar com fome. Isso não é o paraíso?

Ninguém podia ficar com fome. Se você pudesse ficar com fome, seria uma pessoa melhor?

Melhor o quê? Eu sou uma papagaia. Que tipo de pergunta é essa?

Cuspido dos genitais combinados de Mãe Língua e Pai Pênis, o bebê M'boitatá era tão bonitinho, embalado naquela chuva leve e naquele ninho

perfeito de pedra.

Mãe Língua lambia e cantava cantigas de ninar. Pai Pênis cutucava e fazia cosquinhas.

M'boitatá, aninhado e bem cuidado, absorvia o som e a sensibilidade. Um dia, grande demais, caíram do ninho de pedra, rolaram para longe e iniciaram a descoberta de seu mundo, viajando na estação chuvosa com os pássaros, borboletas, macacos e peixes de um lugar a outro e pausando na estação seca para provar uma concentração tribal uma após outra.

Peregrinações nômades, zigzagueando pela floresta, provando cada desejo e delícia.

Numa estação seca, M'boitatá conheceu AiAi. Talvez fosse o arco-íris cintilante. Ela estendeu o braço gracioso e ousado, abrindo sua cortina e apareceu, deslumbrante, a criatura mais linda que M'boitatá já tinha presenciado.

E, com certeza, a essa altura, tinham estado em toda parte e visto tudo.

Como podiam não ter nunca se deparado com AiAi?

Um ser mítico invocado por AiAi. Uma apsará tropical.

Ah, mas um metamorfora sem dúvida. À noite, ela voltava a seu segundo eu.

Que segundo eu?

Uma preguiça peluda, pendurada de cabeça para baixo e que se movia devagar.

À noite, M'boitatá podia se aconchegar na imensa rede de balanço que era seu corpo.

AiAi AiAi AiAi.

Pra encurtar a história, se apaixonaram.

Você quer dizer, eles e ela se apaixonaram. São precisos dois para se dançar o tango.

Não se dança o tango no Brasil.

A partir daquele momento, M'boitatá e AiAi peregrinaram sempre juntos, dividindo uma vida nômade.

Muitos anos de nomadismo, convivendo com cada tribo.

Todas as quatrocentas?

Yanomami, Xipaya, Wariku, Txikao, Sikiama, Saliba, Nutabe, Mayorun, Nanao, Kayapo, Kandoshi, Haumbisa, Duit, Cashibo, Bora, Baniya, Arua, Arabela, Zoe, Yaminawa, Wirina, Wapishana, Tuxinawa, Shuar, Poyanawa, Muiniche, Matis, Madi, Kaxuiana, Jurti, Huachipaeri, Deni, Cara, Baure, Bakairi, Arawak, Apurina, Amuesha, Aikana, Yawanawa, Yabirana, Wayana, Waiai, Tubarão, Shibibo, Pasto, Munduraku, Maco, Kaxarari, Jebero, Hixkaryana, Chayahuita, Capanahua, Bare, Atruahi, Arawa, Apinave, Amarekaeri, Aguaruna, Yawalpiti, Yabaana, Waura, Vilela, Tacana, Sharanahua, Paresi, Mvima, Mrubo, Mchiguenga, Katikina, Irantxe, Guarequena, Chamicuro, Cahuarana, Bara, Ashaninka, Arara, Apalai, Amahuaca, Achuar-Shiwiar, Yaruma, Xiriana, Warao, Urarina, Suruwaha, Saluma, Palikur, Meinaku, Maquiritari, Kuikuro, Kankuamo, Huarayo, Guarani, Cashinahua, Bororo, Baniwa, Aruan, Araona, Ankoke, Akurikyo, Achagua.

Um dia, M'boitatá e AiAi por acaso encontraram uma tribo nova, os Fraugudomijesu.

Não eram bem uma tribo.

Não uma tribo per se. Mais como um mocambo de missionários fugidos e excomungados da teologia da libertação.

Libertação?

Liberem os índios.

Que noção. E depois?

Eles acolheram M'boitatá e AiAi e os incorporaram em seu rebanho.

Incorporados como bananas amassadas na massa de bolo de baunilha.

Mas, felizmente, não cozidos. Eles escaparam.

Ouvi dizer que foram pegos em flagrante.

Mas você pode imaginar a tentação que deve ter sido consumir parte daquele corpo loiro lindo, deitado em estado catatônico sob luzes suaves.

Só se você for um urubu.

O que comeram? Os dedos? Os dedos do pé? O nariz? As orelhas?

Quem sabe? Talvez os mamilos. Cada um comeu um. E depois correram, aquela tribo de malucos correndo atrás deles.

Felizmente, era o romper da aurora e AiAi se transformou de preguiça noturna em seu eu acrobático voador e visceral. Correram como o vento, os pés de M'boitatá girando aqui e ali de forma que seus rastros ficaram ininteligíveis.

E aquele bando de libertadores gritando histericamente atrás deles para todos os lados: O sangue de Jesus! O sangue de Jesus!

Foi uma fuga emocionante, finalmente saltando de uma cachoeira enorme, surfando a cascata resplandecente, despencando, depois se sacudindo, depois flutuando até chegar à beira-mar.

Beira-mar em Uwattibi.

Onde os Toppinikin tinham se estabelecido estrategicamente em uma baía aparentemente segura e serena, para pegar aqueles exploradores desinformados, vindos para colonizar os selvagens.

Mal sabiam eles.

Como turistas, remaram em seus barcos com bugigangas até aquela baía aprazível e calma, em busca da zona de prostituição. Os Toppinikin ficaram lascivamente nus e saudaram aqueles homens de pele rosada como se fossem os primeiros a jamais chegar ao paraíso.

Era uma cilada.

Foram tratados muito bondosamente. Alimentados e servidos sexualmente. Engordados e engordurados. Uma dieta puramente orgânica. E criados soltos.

Não havia para onde ir.

Por que iriam querer deixar o paraíso?

Mas, e M'boitatá e AiAi?

Ah, eles já eram morenos e nus; simplesmente se misturaram com os nativos.

Uwattibi acabou se mostrando muito cosmopolita.

M'boitatá e AiAi podiam passear pelas feiras ao ar livre, a doce fumaça da humanidade churrasqueada no ar. Os comerciantes os chamavam, os convidavam a provar, um pedacinho saboroso de francês, português, alemão ou holandês cuidadosamente cultivado. Um espetinho misto, por favor.

Ai que gostoso! E o indígena?

Sabor um pouco de caça, carne bem magra e um pouco fibrosa, mas cer-

tamente multicultural.

Ao contrário do sabor sofisticado do estrangeiro gorducho. Um deleite para o carnívoro, mas não podia durar para sempre.

Talvez tenha sido o negócio de exportação. Talvez aquele cara, Brillat-Savarin escreveu um artigo e o povo ficou ganancioso. Quem sabe. Antes disso, todo mundo era nutrido e satisfeito, um ideal utópico. Então, eles quiseram mais.

Fênix e unicórnios. Desejo pelo mítico.

Um dia, alguém descobriu que a linda AiAi virava uma preguiça de noite. Ela era inacessível à luz do dia, mas no escuro, pendurada de uma árvore, era a criatura mais lenta da floresta. Uma apsará da floresta, uma encantada. Como seria comer uma criatura tão deslumbrante?

Como comer a própria afrodísia?

M'boitatá e AiAi ouviram os boatos. Criaram um plano de fuga, mas AiAi sabia.

Depois do dia vinha a noite, repetidamente.

Os Toppinikin mandaram seus melhores caçadores; não haveria saída.

No meio da floresta, M'boitatá coaxou e coaxou e centenas de rãs—amarelas, azuis, verdes, vermelhas, cor de cobre, douradas—ouviram sua chamada de amor.

AiAi pressionou seus lábios em cada rã fosforescente e sugou suas glândulas venenosas. Então, ao cair da noite, ela se dependurou preguiçosamente, M'boitatá se aninhou em seu colo suave e barriguinha aconchegante. Eles se amaram docemente e dormiram. Os caçadores chegaram, sem suspeitar de presas tão fáceis. AiAi caiu no chão da floresta e M'boitatá fugiu para o cume do dossel.

Em Uwatibbi, os caçadores foram agraciados com honras e grande cerimônia e AiAi foi atada e recriada em uma extravagância culinária, uma lasca de seu corpo envenenado provado por todos.

Seu cadáver primoroso e fatal.

E assim foi que a tribo inteira dos Toppinikin desapareceu da face da Terra.

De coração partido, M'boitatá vagou em uma direção que imaginou como sendo de casa. Ao longo do tempo—de sua própria existência—o gotejar da água tinha esculpido um ninho maior no local de nascimento que era a bacia de pedra.

M'boitatá se enroscou dentro daquela tigela escorregadia e esperou. Esperou pela dissolução da pedra e de si mesmo.

Tatá tatá tatá.

Fim.

Words by Karen Tei Yamashita and Ronaldo Lopes de Oliveira.
Image by Ronaldo Lopes de Oliveira.
Translated into the Portugese by Ana Maria Seara.

# A Bunch of Paper Boxes Is Not a Novel: A Conversation with Karen Tei Yamashita

*Melissa Chadburn*

*Karen Tei Yamashita is the author of eight books, including the novel I Hotel, which was a finalist for the National Book Award. The recipient of the National Book Foundation 2021 Medal for Distinguished Contributions to Literature and a US Artists Foundation Fellow, she is currently Dickson Emeritus Professor of Literature and Creative Writing at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Yamashita's project troubles themes of identity, culture, history, colonialism, community, unrest, immigration, revolution, while also maintaining a deep sense of linguistic and narrative play.*

**Recently in Lit Hub, Josh Cook wrote: "Yamashita paints a picture of America in perhaps the only way it can be accurately portrayed; not as a monolith, not as a manifested destiny, and not as a melting pot, but as a mosaic whose tiles don't quite line up." Your work is fractured and interesting and requires our engagement. A certain level of obsession drives the project—and a kind of obsession with many different forms—and many different ideas.**

Mosaic is a good word. Living in a mosaic sounds beautiful. I don't know that I'm obsessed with forms. Different projects require different forms.

**Yes, much of writing is container shopping. Finding the right container for each project. Would you say this fragmented approach is a biracial American approach? Or is the desire of the academy to push us toward some kind of definition of its own American impulse?**

I have said that I immigrated back into my own country with my immigrant Brazilian family. My children and their children are multiracial, but I don't think of them as fragmented or split. I believe and hope that their world is much larger, expansive. As for what the academy desires, I don't know. I've lived inside it and am fascinated by the scholarship of my colleagues. I've stuck around to learn.

**Maybe I'm doing the unfair thing of reading your work as autofiction—merely because you are Asian American and often you have a speaker or narrator or protagonist who is also Asian American.**

I am Asian American. I'll cop to that, no problem. This term autofiction is odd since what fiction does not belong to the author's experience? I figure all Asian American fiction must be autofiction.

**Yes, that's so true—I regret that I've started off with questions about the "speaker" and post-colonialism when what I love about your work is its playfulness. Its whimsy.**

These past two years have been awful. And the future looks dark. Much imaginative effort seems to be headed for the apocalyptic. How to work toward a different future and keep positive; it's not that simple. I think you can tell; I laugh a lot. Laughing is good. Very necessary.

**That's why I'm so touched by your fable "M'boitatá." It captures the political and historical stuff—Alexander von Humboldt, for instance, was a naturalist and "explorer" (read: colonizer), often referred to as "the second Christopher Columbus"—but it's also so fun and funny— I mean: They were treated very humanely. Fed and sexed. Fattened and greased. An organic-only diet. And free-ranged. How did this story come to you?**

Maybe you should be interviewing Ronaldo Lopes de Oliveira, whose story

this is. He told it to me over dinner, and I wrote it. The fable is attached to a manifesto we also wrote together: "Manifesto Anthrobscene," which will be published in McSweeney's. The manifesto and the fable are paired in the same way that Oswald de Andrade's "Manifesto Antropofágico" and Mario de Andrade's Macunaima are paired. The two Andrades, not related, were the foundation of the Brazilian modernist movement in the 1930s.

**Your work has expanded my sense of what could be accomplished with writing. As someone who has done so much work in journalism, I turned to fiction after reading I Hotel—but your project was so big. So unapologetically comprehensive. I've read that you found fiction a more suitable genre for exploring the Japanese diasporic experience—can you say more about that?**

I stumbled into fiction because I didn't think I could be a proper academic anthropologist without being able to read Japanese. I went to Brazil to study Japanese immigration to that country. My intent was to go on to study anthropology. I found a project on Japanese communalism that engaged me for the next decade, but I felt that my inability to read Japanese would be a sham. I interviewed these folks in Japanese and Portuguese, but I could not read their documents, diaries, newspapers. So I decided it would be good historical fiction. What did I know? I was a kid just out of college. Seemed like a good idea.

**I get pleasure in watching your writing come almost full circle. Your first novel was set in Brazil, and now this new work is also firmly Brazilian. This is just another way your work acts as an intervention.**

Brazil is half of the South American continent. It makes me sad to see that Latin Americanists don't necessarily study Portuguese or Brazil.

**Speaking of interventions, can you speak a little bit about your multimedia performance pieces—Hannah Kusoh: An American Butoh, Noh Bozos, and Tokyo Camen v. L.A.?**

These performance theater works had a very short life, sometimes two or three showings in one or two venues. It was a lot of work to bring together

actors, dancers, designers, musicians, composers, choreographers, videographers, directors, managers, plus all the paraphernalia. The politics at East-West Players at the time couldn't give us a home, and these performances might have challenged the idea of theater. Anyway, we got tired and gave up. Stephen Sohn edited this work into a book titled Anime Wong, so something of the incredible work of so many folks got preserved. Later, I realized that the form of the play could stand alone as narrative, and I employed these forms in I Hotel. I love the theater and would have continued on, but it was like herding cats. I ran away to sit in a room to write alone.

**Can you share a bit about your outlining or writing process? I recall you saying something about outlining I Hotel on food boxes and having them assembled all around you.**

The boxes—someone called them origami boxes, someone else, take-out boxes—were my attempt at three-dimensional architecture. I wanted to recreate the building of the I Hotel, the rooms, the floors, the lobby, the storefronts. Ronaldo, my husband, is an architect, and I wanted to learn this CAD program he used to draw houses. I thought I could use it to write the novel. That was nuts, so I found this easier Venn diagram software and designed boxes. You see them on the inside cover of the book. I got construction paper, printed these, cut them, and scotched them into blocks. I had 10 blocks. I arranged them. Rolled them like dice. Piled them up. This way and that. I contemplated the blocks, Georges Perec style. My grandkid played with them. I found them smashed under the sofa and coffee table. A bunch of paper boxes is not a novel.

***What are you working on now?***

During the pandemic, I wrote two collections, one based on erased histories of people of color in Santa Cruz, the town where I've lived and taught. But after twenty years, I was surprised to learn what I didn't know about this place. For example, an enslaved man, London Nelson, came to California during the Gold Rush, won his freedom, and settled in Santa Cruz. Upon his death, he bestowed his land and fortune to support the impoverished Santa Cruz public school. The godfather of public education in Santa Cruz was an ex-slave. This collection of stories will be completed by another

eight stories by other authors, similarly about erased histories, and edited by Angie Sujin Lou.

The second collection gathers stories and essays; it's entitled Cannibal Catachresis. "M'Boitatá" is one of the stories. And currently, I'm working on a book/novel, tracing the origins of questions 27 and 28 of a loyalty questionnaire, which Japanese Americans were required to answer while incarcerated during World War II.

ESSAY/NONFICTION

# Prickly Love

*liz gonzalez*

A breeze blew into the kitchen from the cooler in the living room as Grandma Nellie made scrambled eggs with nopalitos (chopped prickly pear cactus paddles), chopped yellow onion, and a sprinkle of salt for my younger sister Cynthia and me. During summer breaks from elementary school, Cynthia and I spent weekdays at our mother's parents' home in the San Bernardino Valley. Grandma Nellie would serve us the nopalitos for breakfast or lunch, with flour tortillas made by hand and warmed over the burner flame. Cynthia and I tore the tortillas into triangles that we used to scoop our food and eat. Such a simple dish, yet so delicious.

I savored the tart flavor and thick texture.

Later, when I was in my mid-twenties, Mama began to make cactus salad for family parties—inspired by a Japanese-Filipino American co-worker who brought one to a potluck at the San Bernardino County courthouse, where they worked. This is the first and only dish I remember Mama making with nopalitos.

Although nopalitos are a staple in many Mexican immigrant and Mexican American households, Grandma and Mama rarely served them, so I considered them special treats. Neither Grandma Nellie nor Mama had a nopal plant in their yards when I was growing up. They used jarred nopalitos from the local Stater Bros. market. Mama got the recipe for her cactus salad from the label on a jar. Over time, she substituted and added ingredients, finally settling on Anaheim chiles, green onions, garlic, tomatoes, oregano, cilantro, carrots, bell peppers, and black olives. Not long ago, stumped about what dish to bring to a Mardi Gras party, Mama created what she re-

ferred to as "Mardi Gras cactus salad" by adding purple cabbage and corn to match the traditional colors of the celebration.

Her salad was a hit.

I never ate fresh nopalitos until I was in my early thirties. They made nopalitos from a jar seem limp, rubbery, and vinegary. Naturally mucilaginous, fresh nopalitos have a mildly earthy scent and are meaty and tender-crisp, like blanched green beans. I promised myself that when I became a homeowner, I'd grow a nopal in my yard.

In early 2010, a few months after buying a home in North Long Beach, my spouse Jorge and I planted a nopal in our backyard. I learned to harvest and clean the cactus from YouTube videos, as well as articles on websites and a lot of experimentation on my own. Honing these skills and making dishes with nopalitos gives me joy and connects me with my mother and maternal grandparents, as well as my Mexican roots. Through trial and error, I mastered positioning my body to avoid the prickles—many as thin and translucent as baby hairs and tiny and sharp as metal slivers—that would get stuck in my clothes and hands when clipping the shiny green nopales. Some prickles have remained in my clothes through hard shakes and multiple washes, surprising me when they pierce my belly or my hips. This is a continual reminder to be cautious and move slowly when navigating the nopal.

I tried several strategies to remove the prickles from the nopales without getting them stuck in my hands. Some were so miniscule that a magnifying mirror was required to find them on my fingers and the curves of my palms. Gloves were out of the question because I find them cumbersome. One article I read suggested burning off the spines and prickles, but it made a mess in the sink and colored the skin of the nopales a sickly gray. Not only that, too many spines and prickles were left behind. In the end, patience and a paring knife worked best. I'm sure there's an easier, quicker way, but taking the time to find and remove the tiniest prickles centers me.

Today, my nopal is taller than our neighbor's one-story garage and as wide as our Meyer lemon tree. It looks like a giant otherworldly being, a descendent of nopals planted by goddesses during pre-Columbian times in Tenochtitlán, the capital of the Aztecs. Large, oblong jointed nopales extend from the base like outreached arms. Tunas—prickly pear fruit—the color of orange sherbet and just as sweet, grow from the edges of the large nopales like fingers, fanned out and reaching skyward toward the sun.

It seems I'm carrying on a tradition. Recently, Mama told me that during her childhood, Grandma Nellie grew a nopal in the furthest end of their backyard. Grandpa John harvested and prepared the nopales for cooking. Mama fondly remembers helping him remove the "picas"—the word our family uses for prickles—from his hands with tweezers. She only recalls two of Grandma's nopalitos dishes: the same scrambled egg dish she prepared for Cynthia and me, and chile colorado, a Mexican pork or beef stew in red sauce.

Grandma Nellie grew up in a Mexican immigrant and first-generation Mexican American neighborhood on the Westside of San Bernardino. Mama and I speculate that she learned to make these dishes from her mother, Pilar. Great-Grandma Pilar died two years before Mama was born. Most likely, she grew a nopal in the backyard of Grandma Nellie's childhood home, as many of her Mexican immigrant neighbors did.

If Great-Grandma Pilar didn't teach her to make nopalitos dishes, Grandma Nellie may have learned from women in the neighborhood. Mama grew up two blocks from Grandma's childhood home. She remembers Nina Chole—her godmother and her mother's best friend—teaching Grandma Nellie to make tamales for the winter holidays. My grandmother's first-generation Mexican American girlfriends also gave her tips on how to prepare other Mexican dishes.

By the time I was born, the space where Grandma Nellie's nopal had grown was paved over with asphalt to make a small parking lot for customers of the small grocery my grandparents ran in front of their home. Only a faded photograph of her cactus garden remains, the nopal outside the frame.

Grandma Nellie retired at fifty-two after having worked since she was twelve years old. My grandparents rented out their house and market and bought and moved into a second home two miles west on the border of San Bernardino and Rialto, in an area called the Rialto Bench.

Grandma Nellie didn't plant a nopal or cactus garden at their new home. Perhaps because she now had a front yard to show off, she preferred to grow roses and other flowers. Perhaps Grandpa John no longer wanted to bother harvesting and cleaning nopales. Or perhaps Grandma Nellie felt that a nopal didn't fit with her new neighborhood, which was mixed—Black, white, and Mexican American. Only two or three Mexican immigrants lived on their long street. None of the neighbors I knew grew a nopal.

Grandma Nellie died in December 2009. I wish I could show her my nopal and serve her nopalitos dishes I've created or learned from those served at restaurants and friends' homes. Nopalitos stirred into frijoles de la olla, mixed in pico de gallo, tossed in a green salad, wrapped with avocado and kalamata olives inside a sprouted grain tortilla, or smothered with vegan mole oaxaqueño from Rocio's Mexican Kitchen in Bell Gardens. The proprietor, Rocio Camacho, is known throughout Los Angeles County as La Diosa de Moles, the goddess of moles.

I'm not a good cook like Grandma Nellie, and certainly not like Rocio. I don't enjoy making dishes that require more than two or three steps, so nopalitos are perfect for me. Although time consuming to prepare, they're easy to cook—whether boiled in a pot with garlic or grilled in a cast iron pan. Not only that, nopalitos are good for you. The mucilage is anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, high in fiber. It decreases blood sugar and LDL cholesterol.

The tunas that decorate the edges of older nopales are nutritious, but much easier to clean. When they're in season, I share them with friends and take bagfuls to Cynthia and my parents when I visit them in the Inland Empire. If the workers we occasionally hire to do repairs show interest, I tell them to take as many nopales and tunas as they like. And I can always count on the mockingbirds and fig beetles—their iridescent emerald green bodies and golden tan trim firme as a custom painted lowrider—to help eat the tunas. Yet many still get left behind to rot. Last year, I advertised free tunas on the neighborhood social media pages and was surprised at how many people responded. I met many neighbors for the first time.

I've failed at growing a basic produce garden with tomatoes, squash, and herbs. Meanwhile, my climate-friendly, giant nopal thrives. It flourishes in harsh heat with little to no care and generates nutritious, hydrating food for humans, animals, and insects.

Grandma Nellie would be proud.

## 4.

By the time I arrived in the 1980s, MacArthur Park had become one of the most crime-ridden and densely populated districts of Los Angeles, a first stop for newly arrived emigrants, a place to find fake IDs and other illegal items, an impoverished neighborhood that would in the late 1990s become known for the Rampart police scandal, in which officers from the LAPD's anti-gang unit boldly harassed the community's largely Hispanic residents, stealing and planting drugs, extorting and terrorizing and abusing the population until an investigation exposed their criminality and shut them down. Some seventy officers were ultimately implicated, making it the largest police scandal in American history.

I used to walk the neighborhood a lot. I'd see the cops in their mirrored sunglasses standing on the Rampart Boulevard sidewalk near Tommy's hamburger stand, smoking cigars while frisking some teenager, looking for the drugs they would steal or plant. I walked between MacArthur Park and Lafayette Park almost every day, strolling Sixth Street past the old Elks Buildi

VISUAL ART

# They are their Own

*Amina Cruz*

Amina Cruz's photography is striking. Her work celebrates queer and trans BIPOC people and spaces on both sides of the Mexico/U.S. border. These portraits are intimate, bringing out the personalities and histories of the individuals, even as Cruz's photographs also conjure the shared social histories and experiences of the community. We're honored to present this portfolio of Cruz's photography alongside Gutiérrez's accompanying essay, "Slow Burn."

— The Editors

*Vincent (2018), Amina Cruz*

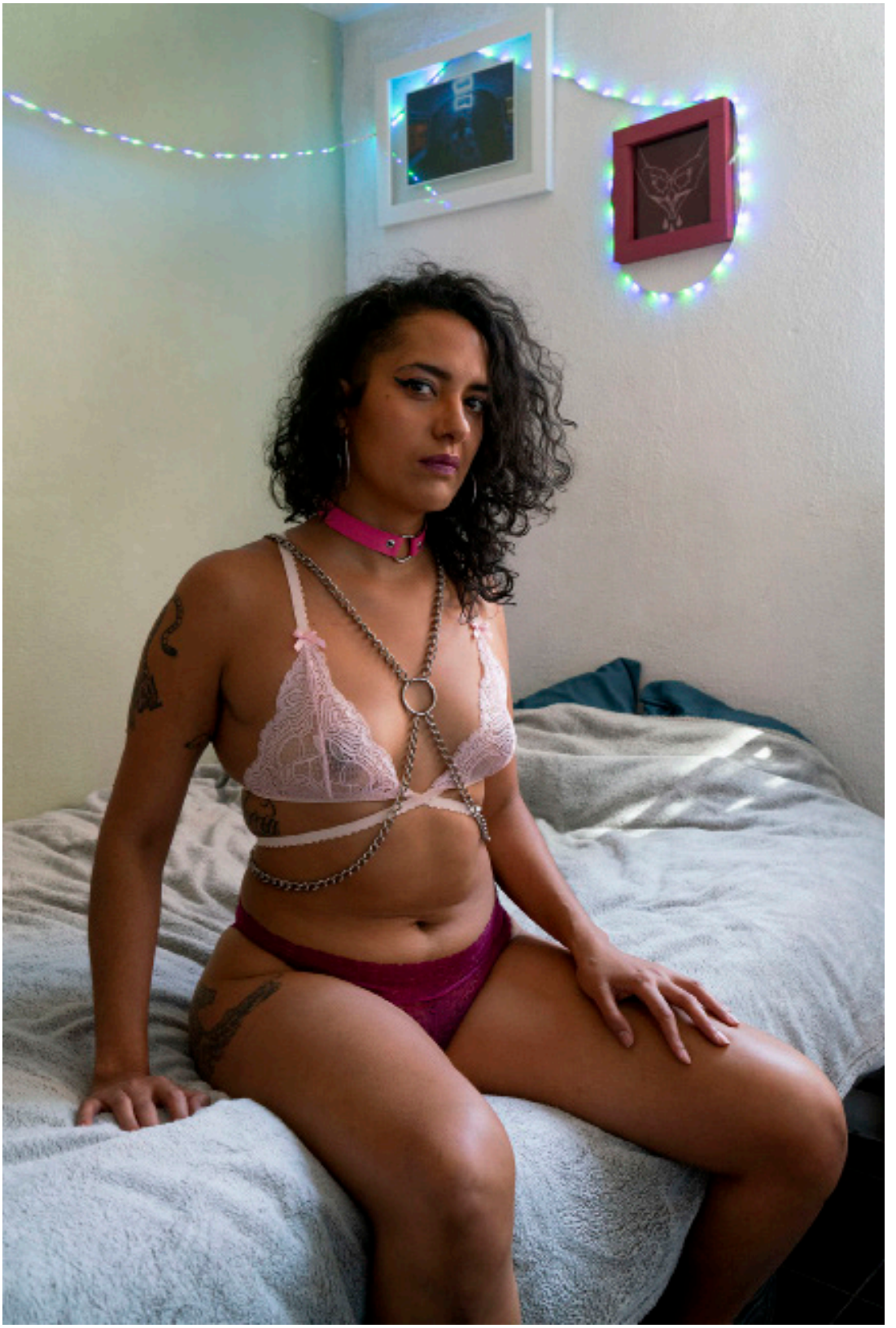

*Frankie Doom (2018), Amina Cruz*

*Maria, Mexico City (2018), Amina Cruz*

*Leather Papi, Mexico City (2018), Amina Cruz*

*Amor, Mexico City (2018), Amina Cruz*

*Queer Pupusa y Softcore Mija (2018), Amina Cruz*



*Adelina, Mexico (2020), Amina Cruz*

*Forrest (2020), Amina Cruz*

*Jordi, NOLA (2020), Amina Cruz*

*Mexico (2020), Amina Cruz*

*Nube (2020), Amina Cruz*

*Sin y Agua (2020), Amina Cruz*

*Uhuru, NOLA (2020), Amina Cruz*

ESSAYS/NONFICTION

# Slow Burn: On Amina Cruz's Photography

*Raquel Gutiérrez*

Queer nightlife has stopped and started and stopped again for many of us navigating restrictions brought on by the pandemic. So I summon the spring and summer of 2018. Back when queer nightlife was last a daily occurrence for me. I think of Martín Sorrendeguy's Cinquentañera, an incredible party at Club Chico in Montebello, marking the punk rock hero's entrance, complete in blue tulle, into his fiftieth year. These events are messily chronicled with blurry smartphone camera photos that now live on the cloud somewhere. I'm shit-grinning, toasting, dirty dancing with the legends of underground culture. My memories sizzle with desire to do it again the way your mouth waters when someone mentions McDonald's fries. Such throwaway moments continue to exist in my mind and perhaps in the anecdotal registers of all the others who were there. But when I want to see the document of these undergrounds that will outlast all of our multitudes, I turn to the photography of Amina Cruz.

The first time I encountered Cruz's photography—like *really* encountered it—I was suddenly the subject. I saw myself anew in a familiar environment, captured onstage with a microphone at my chin, a quiet open-eyed repose, a blue-green aura around my crown, eyes laser-focused in reverence on the televised image of Cyclona, the patron saint of queer Chicanx provocation. I have devoted much of my queer adulthood to resurrecting the revolutionary moments of queer quotidian life in the neighborhoods in which I came of age.

Cruz caught that in one click.

But it's not speed that Cruz relies on for these moments. The film camera

she uses is from 1945. It is not equipped with a light meter nor is it able to focus, she tells me in an email. Cruz cannot force the camera to do what it is not capable of doing. Her practice is predicated on slowness. And slowing down in a club space comes with its challenges, not including the need to remain vulnerable to what is revealed. Cruz operates under a rubric she calls the Brown Gaze. An intentional refusal to overtake the environment, and a rejection of the tenet of objectivity that requires image makers to remain distant. For her, capturing the moment on film is always collaborative and personal.

This moment in which she caught me was from a program I organized with Dirty Looks, a platform for queer film, video, and performance founded in 2011 by film historian and curator Bradford Nordeen. It was an homage to Cyclona, who had been an important embodied vector of Chicano movement activist exhaustion and queer liberatory dynamism for me. Born in El Paso and raised in East Los Angeles, I was eager to turn the local club kids on to Cyclona's artistic corpus. The evening was anchored by a performance that prismatically interpreted the confrontational works for which Cyclona is known. We danced below the bootlegged images of Cyclona's poems screened on the dance floor's television. Cruz had been there to document Gabriela Ruiz and Sebastian Hernández's performance, a Dionysian number culminating in a wild lap dance freak-off that crushed the flaming red Cheetos the two had entered carrying on a silver platter. I was riveted by the night's neon haze peopled in various generational hues.

In other words, all my friends are family.

A few weeks later, I saw a notification from the Zuckerverse and found my countenance suddenly defamiliarized on the IG timeline du jour. It was Cruz's handle and avatar, and I was stunned by a convergence of surprises. First, I was depicted in a way that prompted me to think of all the times I had been to Chico's over the last decade and always felt like I was holding up its walls. In Cruz's photograph of me, I can see my life's mission, and part of it is to emphasize the important role gay bars play in creating queer language and culture. Second, I had to recall if I even saw Cruz that night—certainly not at the bar, on the dance floor, or in the parking lot-turned-smoking section. I imagined the photographer perched and ready to capture each fleeting moment, eschewing the concomitant social exchanges on which these queer gathering spaces are predicated. Third, it occurred to me that Cruz is preternaturally adept in the art of observation. She sees the

queer Brown ecstatic in and of the subjects, even in the split second before that ecstasy absconds with the 4/4 beat from whence it came. More so, I revel in Cruz's ability to earn quickly the trust of the queer public she occupies in pursuit of the image.

Such a vantage point centers queer and trans BIPOC punks in photographic scenes that imply what resisting dispossession, social death, and familial rejection might look like and does so with aplomb. The porous boundaries that underpin the psychic fields of Cruz's subjects come to life in the untitled series that presents a range of Mexico City's queer and trans people in scenes of public intimacy. In *Amor* (2018), we see a masculine-perceived gay couple, lights on the dance floor signaling the end of the night. These two hold each other as if in a rite of passionate homecoming. It is the kind of sensuality, centered in the frame, that emanates with safety and regard for the members of this dyad. It is also a spectacular exhibition of desire oblivious (except for a few curiously voyeuristic gazes) to the rest of the revellers caught in the narrow horizontal mirror at the back of the scene. The crowd in the mirror is in the midst of picking up their own trade or dragging their lovers away from other lovers.

In *Leather Papi* (2018), Cruz directs the viewer's eye to another club-as-art space spectacle with the artist Gabriela Ruiz's back turned to the camera's lens. We see Ruiz with her head back, shirtless, facing the falling wax of a candle as it is held up by a young, feminine volunteer from the audience, her eyes intently focused on the candle angled in her hand. The flame dances atop Ruiz's head as if its tongue of fire was ready to speak. The scene reminds me of seventeenth century Italian religious paintings, but in Cruz's hands, the image is reconstructed, composed of several clubgoers in various states of ecstatic witnessing, book-ended by a young man with hands clasped as if in prayer above his heart where the fanny pack crosses his chest. Much as The Limelight found its purpose inside Manhattan's Church of the Holy Communion, there's a reason why the club is church to many young queer and trans Black and Brown people. Many have nowhere else to turn because of economic precarity or abusive relatives in the home. I have written this elsewhere, but club spaces are care spaces, and Cruz's work is demonstrative of that cognizance.

While the ways that queer BIPOC people are impacted by the unforgiving economies of gentrification and/or migration influence the context of Cruz's oeuvre, it has been those structural stressors that shape the individ-

ual, pulling them towards the collectivizing impulse to form a scene. First, of survival. Second, of conditional recognition. These energies have been amplified by the death and grief and uncertainty that the COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed on these vulnerable communities. In her portraiture and environmental photography, we receive some inkling of how those club and communal scenes provide temporary relief for the undocumented and third generation descendants of migrants by offering a contemplative space where identity and gender might be staged. But such subjects now stand alone, away from friends and community, and don't make entry particularly welcoming—and why should they? As viewers, we aren't meant to cast our gaze as if it were a treat to witness portraits of queer and trans endurance of a toxic power structure that thrives on their dismissal and annihilation. To view these images is already a privilege as we bear witness to the powerful query Cruz poses to her viewers: What does it mean to fashion oneself atop the rubble of social safety nets? Many viewers might never have to entertain that question. But for those who look to living examples of queer and trans fury, refusal, and recalcitrance for their own self-fashioning and language-making, these images are true succor.

The same safety nets have been denied to generations before them. The children of the undocumented are denied every possible chance of access to the various valences in the phrase "social security." Even before they resist and reject the structural domination that metabolized their blood kin, they are resisting the structures that raised them in the private space of the familial home.

In Cruz's current series, subjects like *Jordi NOLA* (2020) are photographed outside the club space in a dizzyingly pink living room, leaning against a dancer's pole, knee bent at a 45-degree angle, eyes fixed cuttingly on the photographer's lens. It is not difficult to conjecture that such a subject finds themselves alone, though often occupying the rooms within a collective household, with roommates or a cadre of lovers, perhaps extended family. The emotional histories of the working class domestic structure vibrate in the unseen backgrounds of these photographs. Or maybe you do see them? In the tilt of the subject's head, the heavy lids of suspicion like those belonging to *Nube* (2020), brows furrowed in skepticism despite being radiantly enshrouded in what I imagine are Los Angeles's famously overflowing pink and orange bougainvilleas.

The expressions that rest on the faces of Cruz's subjects emanate a famil-

iar pain—one where expressing oneself is forbidden in a house run by toxic patriarchs or traumatized matriarchs, and the policing of such expressions is outright abusive. Where in the lead-painted walls do we retrieve our excessive curiosities? That which we hid so as to not overwhelm our overtaxed caretakers? To be willfully dismissed, to be silenced or rendered invisible, means forging an uncomfortable identity palatable for those with limited imaginations.

How do we arrive at a perspective that makes sense of the pain that contoured the psychic spaces everyone hopes to leave one day? Cruz's images remind me of what I have had to expunge in my own psychodramas and the relational struggles that surged from the seeds of my queer childhood. A necessary reckoning that follows every young queer and trans person of color on the verge of deciding their adult fate.

ESSAY/NONFICTION

# A Still Life

*Eva Recinos*

I knew where the queso fresco was stored. The glow of the fridge backlit the bowl, which felt cool in my hands. I carefully snuck it out and peeked into the plastic package, with one perfect slit to access the cheese. Liquid pooled at the bottom of the bowl. Mine was the type of household that respected symmetry. The type where you sliced into the cheese with the right knife and left a perfect line to signify the most recent cut.

No jagged edges or uneven sides.

When I snuck into the fridge to swipe a slice, the queso was salty and savory in my mouth. Sometimes, my mom heated tortillas on the stove and we nestled a piece inside, or crumbled it over beans next to steaming plantains and eggs. Eating the queso by itself, though, was heaven. I never felt the need to dress it up, instead letting its flavors dissolve on my tongue.

On the surface, it was the cheese that drew me to the painting. I was visiting the European art galleries at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art the first time I saw it: "Still Life with Cheeses, Artichoke, and Cherries" by Clara Peeters.

When I worked at the museum, I liked gliding through the galleries on the days it was closed to the public. The stillness always affected me. I would slow down and walk as if in a house made of glass. I could feel the history there. There were religious paintings that long-gone people had once worshipped near, luxurious portraits commissioned by the wealthy of another era. I could read the wall notes to get a sense of context, but what I thought about were the ghosts of those who had made these pieces, and the ghosts

of their intended audience. In certain hallways, I didn't like walking alone because they felt haunted.

I imagine that the European painters and their subjects, staring out from these large, opulently framed portraits, would never have suspected that a Brown girl might, centuries later, gaze at them. Yet Peeters's piece stood out because it was the only still life in that gallery created by a woman. An anomaly. That wasn't the only thing, however; it also had so many things to entice the eyes—gleaming dishes, rounds of cheese, a slice of bread.

I dreamt of visiting Europe one day and sinking my teeth into warm bread and feeling soft cheese hit my tongue. I wanted to know the world through food and art. I would swish it all down with wine.

Peeters painted fancy tablescapes desired by upper classes—the likes of which wouldn't extend an invitation to me. Yet the more I learned about her, the more she captivated me. Born in 1594, she showed talent for painting at an early age, by some accounts as young as fourteen. By eighteen, she was already prolific, creating sophisticated tablescapes, usually set against a dark backdrop.

In 2016, an exhibition of her work became the first ever at the Museo del Prado to be dedicated to a female artist. The institution had been open for 197 years.

The catalogue marks the uniqueness of this exhibition, and of Peeters herself. She is, it tells us, an "artist practically unknown to the general public," with a name "familiar only to the experts." Art history is all about experts, but who gets to be described like that?

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"Still Life with Cheeses, Artichoke, and Cherries" is a painting that an upper-class Dutch family might have in its home. It portrays foods from Holland but also ingredients grown outside the country—a sign that one could pay for these delicacies. Salt was expensive at the time; it makes sense for it to be kept in a fancy, silver piece near shiny trays.

Today, salt is cheap. My mom kept ours in the upper cabinets, and often asked me to hand it and other seasonings to her while she cooked. My dad liked putting salt on orange slices. Eating fruit as a kid was always an event. First, the careful process of peeling and slicing; then, the artful placement on a dish. I remember orange slices arranged on a plate, set against the

tablecloth for me to share with my dad. The sprinkle from a small bottle; savory mixing with sweet. A way of showing love.

Every time I buy fruit on the corner, I ask for a little Tajin and lime juice. I watch as the Latinx vendor deftly slices the fruit and stacks it in a plastic cup. The juice drips to the bottom as I stick my fork into piece after piece.

Peeters's works were "early manifestations of naturalism," according to the exhibition catalogue. Her "paintings of fish are the first that were dedicated to this subject." Naturalism focuses on details as we see them in life, without stylization. Many scenes were natural ones, often landscapes, captured in the most faithful way. A fish portrayed as if it has just been caught. It reminds me of fried mojarra on a plate. When I was little, my mom cleaned our fish. Sometimes she would stick her hand inside and make it say hello to me. I laughed every time. When it arrived at the table sizzling, she would tell me to use a fork to pick out the bones, but I just dug in with my hands. The crisp skin crunched between my teeth and the soft meat dissolved in my mouth. Lime juice ran down my hands. I took napkin after napkin, smiling at the pile of bones and seasonings left on the plate.

Although the food draws me to Peeters's painting, I also pay attention to the other elements of the composition—and her other works. One painting in the catalogue includes a knife, likely from her wedding.

In the cabinet that sits in the background of many of our family photos, my parents kept my older sister's quinceañera knife. I always carried it as if it were precious, bringing it out when there was cake to slice. The tip of the handle was clear, making it more mysterious. There was a matching pie knife, wide enough to hold a full slice on its surface. Both featured the date of her celebration, a memento. They made me fantasize about my own coming-of-age party.

I am a first-generation kid, the youngest of three, so I know how lucky I was to grow up in a house and buy snacks at the corner store. My brother jokes that I was the spoiled one, because I got braces and drank goat's milk from Whole Foods as a toddler because of stomach issues.

When I was growing up, my mom carefully placed exact change in my hand for each bus ride; she didn't have a driver's license, and we took the bus everywhere. This was before shiny TAP cards. Sometimes she told me to ask for a transfer, and the driver would punch a thin piece of paper and hand it to me, the slip fragile between my fingers. Other times I used a token, which I loved for its distinct appearance and the way it clinked to the

bottom of the fare box.

I know what money can buy.

When I was accepted by one of the most prestigious universities on the West Coast, I wondered if I truly earned my place. Affirmative action is a hot topic and people wonder whether you were admitted because of your skills or the color of your skin. In 2019, a celebrity couple spent $500,000 to get their daughters into the same school. When the case went to court, more than fifty people were charged.

I know what money can buy.

Yet that shiny degree doesn't change who I am—a daughter yearning to be home again.

Peeters "transformed the material culture of her period into art," but she was still only a painter. And she had to fight to be that, as a woman. Many female artists of that time were daughters of painters. You weren't allowed to paint nude male models, a major drawback in creating traditional portraits and masterpieces equivalent to those men got to make. Peeters, though, might have had a workshop or assistant to help her produce her works of grandeur.

Her pieces are a "collection of elite items that proclaim distinction." A record of the status that her patrons had achieved. A reminder that they had plenty.

I never wanted for anything as a kid.

Whenever we ate ceviche—my family's recipe featured cooked shrimp, tomato, onion, cilantro, Clamato, and a bit of ketchup—it made me feel grown-up, especially when my mom served it in a deep glass. After I moved out, she did this for me whenever I visited. We'd sit outside as the palm trees swooshed and swayed around us.

I want to see these moments memorialized. I learned to set the table, occasionally trying to fold the paper napkins into fancy shapes. We always ate together, no phones in sight. Joy was feeding other people. Joy was seeing them eat. No empty plates.

Even the smallest bites were luxury.

My mom used plantain skins to cradle slices of the fried fruit, like little boats into which she was carefully placing passengers. She moved from pan to kitchen counter with her spatula. I would sneak in and steal a piece or two.

"I think there's a mouse around here," my mom would say.

I want to see the food I know exalted. Seen by some other generation, some generation I don't know.

I think of our Guatemalan tamales, banana leaves drooping to reveal the glistening insides. As a kid, I took the ingredients for granted: raisins, prunes, pickled bell peppers, green olives, chicken or pork, and the recado, a sauce that requires a blender to come out smooth. As an adult, I marvel at how such disparate ingredients come together: the sour, the sweet, the salty elements that make it a meal.

I realize Peeters and I are doing the same thing. I am also offering a recreation, a replica. Peeters likely kept the objects she painted in her studio to portray them as realistically as possible. I, too, am trying to get as close to the original as I can.

Peeters often incorporated small self-portraits into her paintings. On the surface of one gilt cup, you can catch a few renditions of her face. Artists of her time liked to do this—but for her, the images have added significance because she was a woman working in a field dominated by men.

Those of us who write personal narrative do something similar. We tug at memories and say: Here I was. And: This is what I think it means. Or even: Here's what you should know about this moment. We write ourselves into the space between the lines.

I've been taught humility, first through the Catholic Church, as I sat still in the pews and learned about the stories in the Bible that I should apply to my life. I learned to bow my head. Then, I learned about being grateful for opportunity. My family made new roots in the United States. I learned to feel lucky to be born here. In certain parts of Guatemala, I knew, the basics were seen as luxury.

How could I ask for more?

But all I see in the galleries is desire. A desire to be immortalized. To be seen, or praised, or to appear accomplished. A desire that spans centuries.

Still, there are new interpretations to be found.

Take Nicaraguan-Guatemalan illustrator and designer Susana Sanchez-Young, who creates images featuring foods I know. (My brother was a chambelan at her quinceañera.) One piece shows bright flowers in a can of Ducal, the brand of refried beans I ate for breakfast throughout childhood. There's a plate with beans flanked on either side by bread and tortillas, some nestled into a container with patterned textiles. This is a still life I recognize from home, each element of breakfast set up carefully on the table.

Long before I learned about the European galleries.

And so I search for others: artists with shared identities, although our roots are different. I grew up going to American museums and haven't been to Guate in more than ten years. I text my artist friends and ask what they know of Guatemalan still life painters. It's a question that requires us to dig deeper. One friend posts on social media, a way of widening the search.

I wonder about other foods tinged with meaning and nostalgia. Artists look for subjects with layers of meaning, and food is one such element.

I think of Mayan painter Juan Henry Mendez, whose still life features slices of watermelon, an apple, and a bright blue vase with flowers. The work is inspired, he has said, by how his grandmothers set their tables; the flowers are ones they've grown themselves. Or Lucia Hierro, whose digital print on nylon "Breakfast Still-Life With Greca" depicts a Café Bustelo packet, a Yale mug, a cafetera, Quaker oatmeal, a YouTube screenshot, and more. It's a contemporary spread that captures Hierro's Dominican American identity. The artist makes references to a variety of antecedents throughout her oeuvre; one piece is titled "Breakfast Still Life with Peter Claesz and Peter Cruz."

When I started thinking about all this, a mentor told me about Troy Chew, who also makes work that converses with Dutch and Flemish "masters." I am drawn to one image in particular that feels chaotic: a tableau of two pigs, a dog on a leash, and a cat flying through the air, near a table spilling over with chocolate cake, cookies, chips, a bag of Cheetos, and a live chicken in a pot. There's cheese on the ground and two mice about to feast—or maybe scurry from the cat.

I am hungry after looking at these works. I am buoyed by the form of the still life as it mutates, changes, re-forms. It doesn't feel so strange anymore to yearn for art that evokes my childhood and my nostalgia.

The still life, made anew.

NEIGHBORHOODS PROJECT

# Remember Cash Only: The Delicious Pull of Gardena

*Naomi Hirahara and Edwin Ushiro*

I've never lived in Gardena, "Freeway City," a community south of downtown near the on- and off-ramps of the 110, 91, and 405. I did not spend much time there as a child. My neighborhood sat at the base of the purple San Gabriel Mountains in Altadena. Early memories include being carted through crowded Japanese markets around vats of radishes pickled in stinky fermented miso.

My first full introduction to Gardena came in my early twenties, after I began working for The Rafu Shimpo, a historic Japanese American daily newspaper, founded in 1903 in Little Tokyo. Reporting on the community, I found comfort in Gardena's small ranch homes arranged in a grid on numbered streets, reminiscent of a Monopoly board with single houses on each property. In contrast, the commercial areas of Pasadena were on the verge of a complete makeover. Developers eventually swept away antique stores and tiny Japanese markets on listless blocks of Old Pasadena to make room for a Tiffany outlet, a Cheesecake Factory, and numerous chain clothing stores. Gardena, on the other hand—aside from the swapping out of one of its ubiquitous card clubs for a monstrous Hustler Casino—largely looks the same now as it did in the 1980s.

Gardena is home to a number of seminal Japanese American cultural and faith institutions. Its psychic umbilical cord connects people like me to our

community lifeblood. There is political representation: In 1972, Ken Nakaoka became mayor of Gardena, the first Japanese American to be elected to lead an American city in the West. And there is economic development: Not only did Japanese car companies—Toyota, Honda, Nissan—make their first American corporate home in Gardena, but so did Japanese American businesses like Mikasa, launched by George Aratani after his release from Gila River concentration camp and a stint with the Military Intelligence Service in Minneapolis.

Gardena in the 1970s and 1980s seemed like its own ethnic island, a place of folklore. The typical Gardena Sansei girl, this Pasadena girl imagined, fastened slivers of scotch tape over her eyes to create double eyelids. This same Gardena girl inspired Sansei young men from Northern California to drive more than three hundred miles in search of romance.

Wealthier Japanese Americans have since decamped to Torrance or Rancho Palos Verdes. But some of the community's younger middle and working class, many of them artists, have slowly moved back into neat and more affordable (by Los Angeles standards) apartments and ranch homes, some owned by their grandparents or parents.

There's always a party in Gardena; even the municipal events are reminiscent of backyard celebrations. City Hall will host a wine and cigar festival followed by a pet adoption the following weekend. There are ice cream socials, a koi show, heritage festivals, and annual holiday events.

My collaborator, Edwin Ushiro, moved to Gardena a few years ago from Culver City because he and his wife Lynn wanted to be close to her 100-year-old grandmother. Gardena has that small-town feeling without being so remote, writes Edwin, who is renowned for his dreamlike illustrations of his native Maui. Gardena feels like Hawai'i, only a Hawai'i in the 1990s.

In contrast to credit card-only transactions in Culver City eateries, Edwin found himself going down the Gardena rabbit-hole. In line at a local market, he was ushered in front of two seniors who were writing checks and didn't want him to have to wait for them. At Meiji Tofu, an artisan-level, non-GMO tofu maker on Western Avenue, the cashier wrote his first name on a piece of paper and said that he could pay later after Edwin discovered that he had no cash on him. (Being a dutiful Maui boy, he of course went immediately to an ATM and returned to pay a few minutes later.) Then, he stopped by Sakae Sushi, the beloved takeout-only spot. His jaw dropped when he saw the cash-only sign.

There's absolutely no place like Gardena in the continental United States with its legacy Japanese American food. No matter what new pop-ups or food trucks emerge in gentrifying neighborhoods, nothing can replicate what has taken root in a valley that once was the fertile host to strawberry fields.

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Gabrielino Indians and then settlers, part of the Rancho San Pedro land grant, were the first to come to Gardena Valley. They were followed by Chinese agricultural laborers. At the turn of the twentieth century, the Japanese immigrants arrived, who grew strawberries in Gardena and adjacent Moneta and Strawberry Park, areas later absorbed within the city's official borderlines.

Strawberries, a labor intensive crop back then as well as now, require workers with skilled hands and sturdy bodies to stoop down and pluck the red fruit from vines planted on elevated beds. The Japanese were good with their hands, it was said. We played into the stereotype because why not? Both men and women labored in the fields, sometimes even on Sundays, causing white Protestants to protest that this disregard for the Sabbath and gender roles gave the Japanese an unfair advantage. For the Issei and Nisei, the concern was for economic survival and also family.

You didn't need much acreage to eke out a living with strawberries—this was a perfect crop for Japanese immigrants who didn't have much capital but did have a built-in labor force. My father was part of this strawberry legacy. Not in Gardena, but in his birthplace in Watsonville, part of John Steinbeck's Salad Bowl. After being relocated to his parents' native Hiroshima when he was about three years old, he returned to Watsonville in his late teens, after World War II. He went to Texas to pick tomatoes as a migrant farm worker, then returned to Watsonville to tie up asparagus and work in an apple dehydrating plant. It was only a matter of time before he turned to strawberries. Strawberry tenant farming sustained him and his older brothers as they acclimated to post-World War II American life. Just like the fruit

that they picked, my father and an uncle moved from one location to another before ending up in Southern California.

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Being the child of people raised in Japan meant my Saturdays were spent at a Kyodo System Japanese language school. I, like my classmates, held two identities. During the week at public school, I was a dutiful student, maintaining close to a straight A average. But on Saturdays, this facade melted away, revealing my other more notorious self, a hell raiser and regular cheater. That week's assigned kanji, complicated Chinese characters, were written on the underside of my forearm or on scraps of paper hidden in pockets, which I brought out during weekly quizzes. It made sense that we young Japanese Americans were revolting at this effort to infuse in us the exact culture that the larger society told us was a source of shame.

Gardena had at least two Japanese schools, one connected to the Gardena Buddhist Church. Most dreaded were Japanese speech contests, in which I couldn't remember what came next in my memorized speech. I had no choice but to stumble forward. Yet even as I shamed my family, I learned an important lesson. You won't die if you make a blunder on stage.

Beyond the speech contests, the undokai, athletic competitions, were the most F.O.B. (Fresh Off the Boat) activity in which I participated. What made the Japanese school experience so unpalatable was the way it imported Japanese cultural practices into my teenage American life. Saturday language school began with students lined up in a grid for "Radio Taiso," a Japanese national calisthenics routine that continues to be followed in schools and workplaces. Imagine my surprise, during a Zoom for artists sponsored by the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center in the early months of the pandemic, when a young community activist led us in a session of "Radio Taiso" in our chairs at home. The sing-song recording no longer provoked the same pang of embarrassment. Moving my body together with others—no matter how separated we were geographically—provided a brief physical and psychological relief from the isolation we were experienc-

ing.

While I sometimes resented the undokai activities—the wearing of red or white hachimaki around our foreheads to identify which team we were competing for—I did relish the picnic food. My mother and other Japanese immigrant women were the original reusing queens, holding to the principle of "mottanai," or "don't waste [anything]."

Broadway and Bullock's square, embossed boxes were repurposed and lined with wax paper to hold perfect rectangles of onigiri, rice balls wrapped in black dried seaweed, or makizushi, rolled vegetable sushi, colorful with tamago-yaki (a type of egg omelet), blanched spinach, and kanpyō, brown strings of shredded calabash gourd. Certain triangular onigiri contained the embedded treasure of a red pickled plum, salty enough to serve as a semi-preservative. Those boxes of rice balls were prepared and brought to undokais, kenjinkai (prefectural) and gardener picnics.

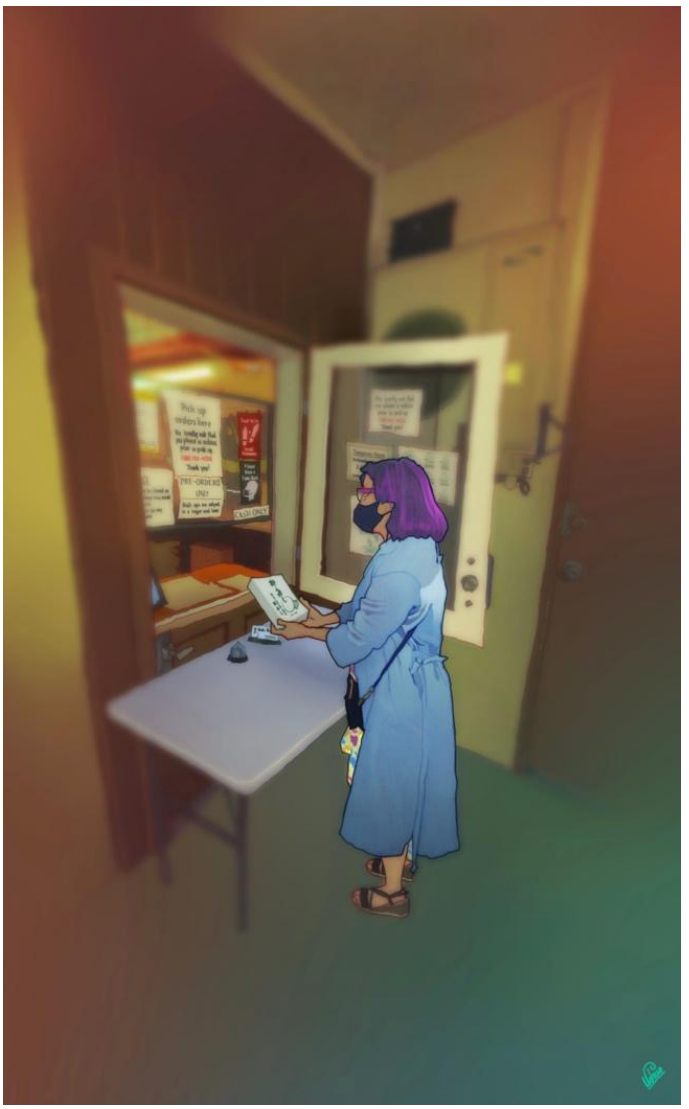
The distribution of door prizes was a necessary practice of such gatherings. I won my first door prize at a gardener picnic. I can still remember that flush of excitement, going forward with my winning ticket. I didn't care that my prize was a clear plastic trash can. I proudly placed it in my room next to the desk that my father had built for me.

For all of these reasons, Sakae Sushi is the heart of Gardena. It's take-out only and, as mentioned, cash only, thank you. Before the pandemic, you could peruse the menu inside a small room where old People magazines were lined up on a table for those waiting to pick up their orders. Most offerings are vegetarian, including the type of makizushi served at undokais and community picnics. There are also what Japanese Americans call "footballs": inarizushi, deep-fried soybean pockets that are simmered in broth before they are stuffed with rice. You can choose both seafood and egg options; most reminiscent of country life are the marinated saba (mackerel) nigirizushi. I travel back to the days when Fish Harbor on Terminal Island was full of Wakayama immigrant fishermen when I take a bite of those salty silver fish slices over a ball of vinegar rice.

For Edwin, Sakae Sushi connected him to his hometown in Maui. On one of his early visits, he encountered Emi Tani Castillo, part of Sakae Sushi's new generation. She picked up on his pidgin and asked if he was from Hawai'i. As it turned out, she was related to a Maui family, one of whom had been Edwin's old friend from Boy Scout days. Every holiday season, the family travels to Gardena to help Sakae Sushi with its overwhelming New

Year's Day orders (comparable to the demand for tamales for Christmas). These things don't surprise me anymore, he says. While turning a corner on the streets of Gardena, he may be bumping into ghosts that have traveled across the Pacific Ocean.

Both Edwin and I agree that Sakae's presentation of the sushi is exquisite. The pieces are arranged in a cardboard box lined with wax paper, just as it's been done by families for decades, and then wrapped with paper featuring the store logo in green. It's a masterpiece of presentation and taste, all for under ten dollars. In an era where we idolize scarcity, I value the accessibility of Sakae Sushi's beauty and deliciousness. Even though the pandemic has necessitated certain changes—call-in orders are now requested and pick-up is from the back, through a plexiglass window—it's still cash only and the food is thankfully the same.



*The writer, Naomi Hirahara, orders a box of sushi from the back door of Sakae Sushi, a new practice due to the pandemic. Illustration by Edwin Ushiro.*

*

Gardena is working class, which reminds us of our roots, whether that means the sugar plantations of Hawai'i or the gardening routes of people like my father, dressed in a white T-shirt, jeans, work boots, and a baseball hat. The city is more ethnically diverse now, with Black and Brown families living in apartments and those single family, detached homes.

The community has a notorious side with its history of card clubs and burlesque shows, now eclipsed by Larry Flynt's Hustler Casino, which dominates one of the main thoroughfares, Redondo Beach Boulevard. For decades, Gardena had a monopoly on poker clubs in Southern California, despite constant efforts by disapproving residents to shut them down. Then in the 1960s, neighboring cities such as Bell Gardens and Hawaiian Gardens


*The pandemic-era sushi box from Sakae Sushi. Photograph by Naomi Hirahara.*

legalized card clubs, which led to the closure of many historic ones in Gardena.

My father was a gambler, frequenting the local gas station after hours to play poker. When I began work at The Rafu Shimpo, I began to understand the full embrace of gambling in the larger Japanese American community. Many Japanese American retirement celebrations, veteran and World War II gatherings, and family reunions were held at the California Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas. After a long night at the gaming tables or slot machines,

you could order a hot bowl of saimin noodles—a Hawaiian standard—at its Asian restaurant. Saimin is similar to ramen but is usually served in a clear broth. Its egg noodles are distinctive, wavy and chewy, and usually topped with char siu, Cantonese-style roasted pork.

Gardena Bowl, much like the now shuttered Holiday Bowl in the Crenshaw District, is perhaps more famous for its food and communal gatherings than for its bowling. Edwin claims its coffee shop boasts the best bowl of saimin in Southern California. It's simple, which is difficult to find these days, he writes. Gardena Bowl makes their own char siu and I think that makes a difference. The noodles are not overcooked and the broth not too salty, has good clarity (I don't like foggy broth) and is very hot. Important on those cold nights. Presentation is clean. You see the pride in the care of their food.

*Among Sakae Sushi's offerings are the traditional vegetarian makizushi, which includes kanpyō (calabash gourd), inarizushi (fried tofu pockets) and saba (pickled mackerel) nigiri. Photograph by Naomi Hirahara.*

But you have to eat the bowl right there, not to-go as it is offered during the pandemic. I look forward to the day when I can saunter into the coffee shop, bump into an old friend, and let the steam of a bowl of saimin moisten my eyelashes.

*

Along Western Avenue, on the central southern edge of the city, sits Gardena's Japanese section. It's not called that, but I can't help but think of the blocks stretching from north of 162nd to 166th streets in such a way. Once upon a time, the area was home to Yo's Custom Rods and Tackle Shop, where you could get a saltwater fishing pole wrapped to face a 100-pound bluefin tuna on a deep-sea expedition, or Saeko Oyama's Let's Knit Yarn Shop, where a bride- or groom-to-be could order a 1001 origami crane display. Those places are gone now, but other landmarks continue to buoy this legacy neighborhood.

Whereas San Francisco's Japantown is fighting to keep its one confectionery store open, the Gardena section has two—Sakura-ya and Chikara, only 256 feet apart. By confectionery, I mean a shop that sells mochi, the soft, sweet treats that often contain red bean (although I usually veer toward solid mochi), or manju, baked sweets.

*Edwin, a native of Maui, maintains that the saimin at Garden Bowl is the best in the Southland. Photograph by Edwin Ushiro.*

You'd think there would be competition between the two family-owned businesses, because aren't they selling the same product? Mochi/manju aficionados know better. Sakaru-ya boasts creations so soft that they practically dissolve in your mouth. Simple, unadorned disks, nothing unexpected.

Chikara, on the other hand, features confections as intricately decorated as a Fabergé egg. There are usually seasonal offerings. You buy a box of Chikara manju to impress friends at a party, bring cheer to a sick friend, or impress relatives of a romantic partner. Chikara signals that you are serious and committed.

I'm more of a Sakura-ya woman, I have to admit. Among my favorites are the orange mochi without filling and kinako mochi, a cylinder of soft green with smooth red bean inside and kinako, roasted soybean powder, sprinkled on top. As with the offerings from Sakae Sushi, these delicacies are in my mouth before I reach the car.

Edwin sometimes passes through this part of Western during his morning walks. During the depths of the pandemic, he observed four people, socially distanced and spaced appropriately in a line outside Chikara. A few steps later, two people were doing the same outside of Sakura-ya. We all needed a bite of comfort that could not be satisfied in any other way.


*Sakura-ya at 16134 S. Western Ave. has served manju and mochi since April 1960. Photograph by Edwin Ushiro.*

*

Further south on Western is a cluster of buildings that don't match but belong to the same organization, the Okinawan Association of America (OAA). If you are not part of the clan, you've probably never entered the reflective multi-level central structure or the adjoining presentation spaces. It's not that visitors and newcomers are unwelcome; it's more that the buildings are hidden in plain sight. In one of my favorite Japanese folk stories, "Tongue-Cut Sparrow," a wounded sparrow takes an older couple to Sparrow World, where life is animated and colorful, full of dancing. OAA is like that at certain times.

When I visited the OAA before the pandemic, there were traditional dancers, not in shibui, the muted colors of Kyoto, but in bright neon yellow and tomato red costumes. In another room, musicians strummed snakeskin-covered, banjo-like instruments called sanshin or shamisen, while students of all ethnicities practiced the endangered Okinawan language of Uchināguchi.

Both sets of my husband's grandparents were from Okinawa. His maternal grandmother, Kame, was more popularly known as Mama for her matriarchal hold over her blood family as well as the larger Okinawan American community.

In her fourplex in the Uptown area of Los Angeles, she might be discovered stirring a pot of boiled snake, a delicacy in Okinawa, or giving goya, bitter melon, to her Dominican tenants. (We are still wondering how these neighbors prepared the melon!) Gardena is one of the few spots where a restaurant such as Kotohira (in Tozai Plaza on the corner of Redondo Beach and Western) offers an Okinawan menu, including goya chanpuru, a type of stir-fry with the bitter melon, and two kinds of Okinawa noodles. As Okinawans reportedly live longer than any other humans, their food is worth checking out.

*On the same block as Sakura-ya is another Japanese confectionery shop, Chikara Mochi, which is known for its beautiful, elegant designs. Photograph by Naomi Hirahara.*

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In *Life After Manzanar*, a book I co-wrote with my friend Heather Lindquist, we traced the threads that led from the World War II detention center in the Owens Valley to Gardena. The head Buddhist minister at Manzanar, Shinjo Nagatomi, came to Gardena with his wife and two young daughters after being released from the camp on the day before Thanksgiving, 1945. He and his family had waited until all the inmates left. The last

ones remaining, including the Nagatomis, numbered forty-nine.

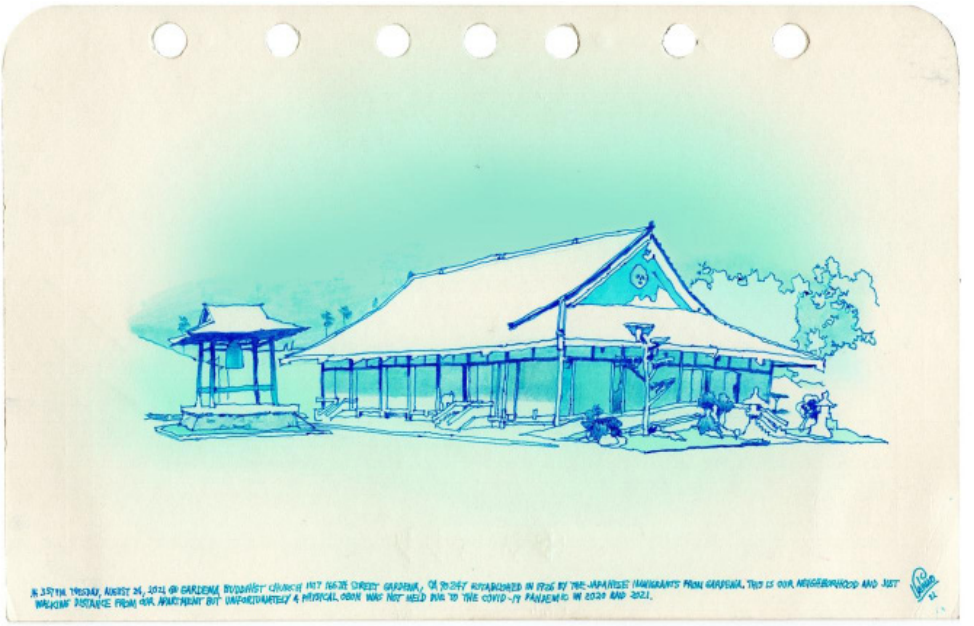
I had heard of Evergreen Hostel in Boyle Heights but was unaware that Gardena Buddhist Church supported its own hostel as well. Its sanctuary and Japanese language school housed people released from the ten detention centers. Since I had an address for the hostel location, I drove around the perimeter of the temple, attempting to find the exact spot. The closest current building was a yellow stucco duplex with a white garage where pots of succulents were sold. The proprietor, an Asian immigrant, showed me a paper with a grid of prices for different-sized containers. Although my questions about the resettlement of Japanese Americans in 1945 were not answered, I did take home a medium-sized pot of aeonium for three dollars.

Gardena Buddhist Church, with its majestic sweeping black tile roof and bell tower, is a story of resilience. In July 1980, an arsonist burned the tem-

*A search for the former Gardena hostel location which housed released Japanese Americans after World War II led the writer to this house which sells succulents. Photograph by Naomi Hirahara.*

ple down to the ground. The members, many of whom had either been held in World War II mass incarceration camps or were descendants of people who had, raised funds to rebuild. Then in November 1981, the arsonist, still not apprehended, hit again. Unbelievably, the culprit struck a third time in February 1982. Luckily, this fire was discovered early and localized to a section of the sanctuary.

The perpetrator, a man named John Alden Stieber, confessed months later to Gardena police, who had been stumped in the case. In addition to the Gardena Buddhist Church, Stieber also set fire to two area Catholic churches, a Baptist church, and a Presbyterian church. The courts deemed him insane. He claimed that he was on a mission to stop a conspiracy by the Catholic Church, the Bank of America, and the Japanese people to take over the nation.



*Gardena Buddhist Church Illustration by Edwin Ushiro.*

It cost more than a million dollars for the property to be completely restored. Now, the scars of this traumatic period have disappeared. Prior to the pandemic, community members in brightly colored happi coats and cotton yukata would gather every summer at the popular Obon Festival to dance, socialize, and eat goodies like Okinawa dango, similar to donut holes but much heavier and earthier.

I doubt younger members of the congregation are aware of the temple's role in helping Japanese Americans make the transition back to the "free

world" in the 1940s. That the temple was able to rise up multiple times testifies to the Japanese proverb, "nana korobi, ya oki." Fall down seven times, get up eight. Today, as we attempt to recover from the pandemic, I hold onto that adage.

Maybe that's why Gardena weighs powerfully in our collective Japanese American minds, or at least in mine and Edwin's. We recognize the pain of removal and displacement while reclaiming the place, or at least a corner of it, as ours. So when I pull off the paper from that Sakae Sushi box or dip my hand in the bag stamped Sakura-ya, it's not merely for the vinegary snap of marinated mackerel or stretchy pull of mochi. Contained in those culinary experiences are memories of what sustained our community, not only during my lifetime but even before I was born, when the strawberry fields dotted the valley. Each time I stop by Gardena, I'm breathing in snapshots of my very existence, the institutions and cultural practices that helped to form me, the care and preparation of food not for Michelin star status or Instagram but rather for walk-in customers with a balled-up ten-dollar bill in their pockets and a glint of anticipation in their eyes.

POETRY

# “Orbit,” “Becoming Unbecoming”

*Leah Umansky*

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## ORBIT

For me, it’s an appreciation of my will and my willingness to release: mutual forces yet mutually exclusive.

*If you feel something getting tight, start over.*

*

Storms on Saturn can create diamonds, uncut, but full of sheen and star. Eventually, they are forced to dissolve into a liquid, but at one time they are wholly spark and heft. [THINK: gemstones falling in space.] It’s the pressure that acts. I don’t want pressure to act, just to get me in motion, and I am already in flight.

## BECOMING UNBECOMING

We lean towards our habit, our inventiveness. We feel what we see. We shift. We pattern. We turn. It is a revelation: the reveling, the revealing, the unveiling, the lifting off of the inner-revolutions is a revelation in itself. I walk through the room, seeing where to step, noticing where to turn, but still, I bump. Still, I bang. Still, we are unbecoming and becoming and unbecoming…

/

I am unbecoming. The paths are endless now, waiting. I am rendering the rigor, the fieldwork, quartering my truths; I am beginning the story over.

I am beginning the story over. What is coming, once frozen, soon will be parched and open-mouthed, soon will be relieved and mystical and striving for a voice, a laugh, a face from within. I can smile now, knowing I took the chance, knowing I didn't race away from the fear, the ragged, the silent flight of loneliness, knowing I went towards the glimmer, its stalk, its humbling of the self; now, I will pattern anew. The I, once heroic, will bird itself into glee, a testament to seeing, a light in the room once dark. No wait-starts, no empties of meaning, the upended now neutral. The unbecoming will become again, a story, a jumble of soft and will sharp into a shape, already familiar.

//

Getting here, to this point, to the middle of this line, is a becoming, is a stare with the eye, an inherent worth, a stare in the face of the world, a wave of both truth and toxin, a whale of a run towards the light of any eye, any heart,

my heart.

FICTION

# The Concrete Slides of Northern California

*Gayle Brandeis*

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**Mountain Lake Park, San Francisco**

I recommend starting your concrete slide tour here. This park has a humble slide, but a solid one, which, like all the others you'll find in this city, has miraculously survived safety-minded playground renovations over the years. (Concrete slides are not safe. You can burn your skin, break a bone, crack your head open if you're not careful. Try to be careful.)

This slide is the northernmost one in San Francisco. We'll be working our way down. We'll be working our way into a loop of sorts. We're starting with a slide I never visited as a child. When I go to this park, I'm not assaulted by nostalgia. I can see the slide for what it is, see the park for what it is, nice and modern, a kidney-shaped playground surface in shades of blue, yellow, and green, a climbing wall pimpled with red handholds next to the slide. It's not a palimpsest, all the old equipment, all the old stories, creaking beneath the surface. A good place to begin.

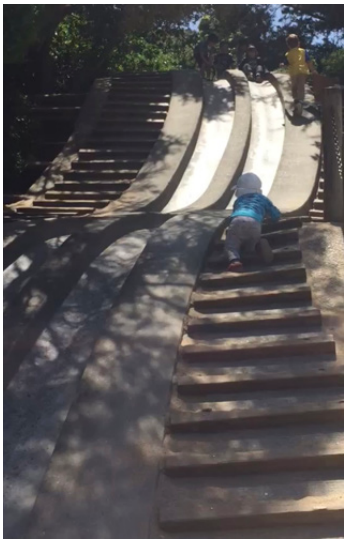
There's usually a stash of cardboard near the base of any concrete slide you'll visit, left behind by other sliders to help smooth your ride and prevent road rash (or they're too lazy to recycle it). But you'll probably want to bring your own. They say the virus can't survive on surfaces for very long,

but better to be safe than sorry, right? As safe as you can be on a concrete slide. I have a stack of cardboard in my trunk for this very purpose—sides of boxes from Target and Hello Fresh and whatever that wine club is called. We're all ordering so much more online these days—you should have plenty of cardboard. If you want to go extra fast, you can tape or staple some wax paper to the bottom of the board. And don't forget to mask up (even if you are vaccinated) and bring plenty of hand sanitizer—you want to be a slider, not a spreader!

This slide is short and wide, for those who prefer girth instead of length. (As you can see, this is not a guide for children.) It's a great entry point into your concrete slide journey, this quick, smooth swoosh.

### Koret Children's Quarter Slides, San Francisco (Golden Gate Park)

Our next stop, Golden Gate Park, is one of the most beautiful places on earth, and its Koret Children's Quarter is one of the oldest playgrounds in the country. It still features the original 1914 carousel (populated with ostriches, giraffes, sea monsters) but that's not why you're here. You're here for the slides.



This side-by-side pair of concrete slides, built into the side of a hill in the 1970s, is long, sleek, and elegant, with a gentle curve halfway down, like an attenuated vertical tilde. The slides are flanked by wide concrete steps,

creating a beautiful symmetry; no handrails, just low sculptural concrete. Very mid-century. The steps take a lot of breath to climb, and you might be tempted to take off your mask, but don't (unless you need to use your inhaler and no one else is within six feet). Hopefully, not many people are here. Hopefully, any people who are here are being good citizens. Hopefully, they'll see you're being a good citizen, too, and leave you alone.

You lay your cardboard on the top of the slide, and you think about what the cardboard used to hold—the ingredients for turkey tetrazzini, say, or melatonin and the bread pans you still haven't used yet, or a case of cabernet. Then you lower yourself onto it and let gravity do its work. You scream all the way down.

By the way, did you know this playground used to have different sections for boys (a ball field) and girls (a croquet lawn)? It was then called Sharon's Quarter for Children, and older boys and men were not permitted. I'm glad my brother didn't know this.

**Hilltop Park, San Francisco**

Our next stop is the last in the city (at least for now). You may ask: Why are there so many concrete slides in San Francisco? I wish I could tell you.

My research has turned up nothing. Your guess is as good as mine.

Head over to the Bayview neighborhood to find Hilltop Park. You might know it for its eighty-foot-long slanted concrete sundial—it looks a bit like a slide itself, but trust me, it's not. If you knew this sundial from way back when, you could be surprised to discover it was painted bright yellow during renovations; it looks kind of like a Calder sculpture now. You may also know Hilltop had the first skatepark in the city. My brother loved that skatepark. He really wanted a board after we moved to San Francisco—so many hills! Our parents refused—so many hills!—but he used his allowance to buy one himself and came here pretty often. No matter how much time he spent doing ollies and kickflips, he made time to go on the slides with me.

Hilltop has a single and a double. The latter is like the one at Golden Gate Park, but not nearly as stylish. It doesn't have the same swerve, and it doesn't have built-in steps—there's a concrete ramp between the single and double slides, with large ugly rocks set into the ground on either side of it, making for a less congruent design. Honestly, the slides here look a little dumpy compared to those at Golden Gate. Perhaps it would have made sense to come here first—less anticlimactic that way—but then we'd have to backtrack to get to our next stop. One nice thing about Hillside is that the double slide has a smooth concrete arc over the top of it. My brother would sometimes sing "Somewhere Under the Rainbow" before we slid down side by side.

**Brigadoon Park, San Jose**

Do you know the way to San Jose? (Imagine me singing this, even though you don't know what my voice sounds like.) It's about an hour's drive from Mountain Lake Park—an hour and one minute, according to Google Maps. I'm structuring this tour as if you're going to do it all in one day, slide to slide to slide, but you don't have to do that. Pace yourself as needed.

Like Mountain Lake, Brigadoon also has a single and a double. Perhaps they were designed by the same person, or one was inspired by the other? Either way, the double doesn't have an overhanging arc, and there's a large field of concrete sloped between the slides, kind of like a rough slide in itself. It's pretty depressing-looking, actually. It makes me think of Soviet

architecture, stark and dour.

My brother lived in San Jose for a while, after my parents kicked him out and a friend got him a job as a janitor at Cisco. I didn't have a driver's license yet, or money, or awareness of how to get anywhere, or the courage to figure out how, or I would have visited. Maybe even moved in with him. I hope he visited this slide, bleak as it is—it was on his list, but he didn't strike through any of the locations, so it's hard to say. I know for sure he went to at least four. I hope he had a chance to go to all of them. I hope I'm retracing his steps.

**Codornices Park, Berkeley**

In a wild coincidence, this park is one hour and one minute away from Brigadoon Park—I love the symmetry of that (kind of like the symmetry of the slides in Golden Gate Park). The single slide is in a shady area, like something out of a fairy tale. It curves under the canopy of a huge old oak; the stone steps leading to the top of the slide are built around the tree's thick trunk. The design of this slide is graceful and organic, flowing with the landscape. It's not the fastest, but the sides are higher in some places than in others, rising along the final bend like a wave with a lip—watch out for skinned elbows!

This park is near the rose garden—if you're not racing to the next slide, you might want to walk through the tunnel that runs beneath the street and literally stop to smell the roses. Doing so may be important for your well-being, but it may also make you think of how your brother made you rose hip tea from the roses outside his apartment building (this was after you had your driver's license, plus he had moved to the Castro, so it was easier to get to him). He told you rose hips were good for the skin (you tried not to take this personally—you had some acne that made you feel self-conscious), that they boosted immunity and helped the heart. He couldn't drink them anymore, he told you—they were contraindicated with lithium. Anyway, he didn't need more hips—the T he was finally taking was helping to narrow his hips, turn them into hips that felt more like his own.

## Dorothy Bolte Park, Berkeley

The Berkeley hills are full of parks—Dorothy Bolte is only six minutes away from Codornices, and there's another park between them (Indian Rock—no concrete slide there). It's another lovely arboreal park. The single slide doesn't feel quite as fable-like as the one at Codornices, maybe because the green metal bar that's been placed over the top of it feels like something you'd find on a newfangled plastic slide. But this slide is steeper and faster and will give you more of a workout to get back to the top. (I do recommend more than one run for each slide on this tour—the first is just for the rush of it; after that, it's to notice all the nuances.) The sides of this slide are also pretty high, so be sure to also tuck your elbows in here as well.

My brother dreamed of going to UC Berkeley. He loved the activist history of the place. He would have studied political science, he told me, or maybe architecture. He had a dream of building a house, a big modern house with a concrete slide inside it, next to the stairs. But he never finished high school after he came out as trans to our parents and they kicked him out. They never stopped calling him by his dead name when they spoke of him, never stopped calling him their daughter. He talked about getting his GED, about going to college someday, but that never came to pass.

## Lincoln Estates Park, Roseville

The next stop is an hour and thirty-two minutes away. Another double slide, sort of a cross between Codornices (nice organic curves, nice trees) and Brigadoon. The dirt around the slides looks desolate. For some reason, the cardboard strewn about here looks more forsaken than it does elsewhere, too. But there is a kind of intimacy to this double slide that the others don't have, which is strange because the divider separating the two sides is higher than any other double we have visited along the way. Perhaps it's the sinuousness of these slides, like snakes undulating together. It made me a little uncomfortable, to be honest. I refuse to go on the slide when

anyone else is nearby.

Don't worry about being assaulted by roses and their accompanying memories in Roseville—this town is not full of the flowers, although apparently wild roses do grow along the ravine. The place used to be named Junction—it's where the California Central and California Pacific tracks crossed. Then it became Roseville Junction, then just Roseville. There are many different stories about the origin of the name; my favorite has to do with two railroad men fighting over a woman named Rose. Still, whatever the real story may be, please remember the name changed over time. Changes are important. Names are important.

Barry. My brother's name was Barry.

## Hillside Park, Rancho Cordova

The newest concrete slides in Northern California, at least the newest on Barry's list, are thirty-seven minutes away. Built in 2014, the two single slides, a couple of feet apart on a hill made of green and blue rubber, are geared more for young children than for adults—they're pretty short and not very steep. Still, they're worth a stop, even just to look at them. These slides have a unique feature, a little round basin at the bottom of each one, like the bowl of a spoon. This makes for a graceful dismount. No cardboard necessary on these babies. There's also some interesting texturing on the outer sides that makes the concrete look almost like wood. I prefer smooth concrete but this is a nice touch, and of course, I'm thrilled to know concrete slides are still a part of modern playground design, even if they're more safety-minded now. I'm sure Barry was thrilled about this, too.

## Slide Hill Park, Davis

It will take you thirty-eight minutes (near symmetry with the last trip) to get to this next stop, the place where it all began—the breeding ground, ground zero, of our lifelong obsession with cement slides. Barry and I grew up in Davis, close to Slide Hill Park. The park has a pool and we spent plenty of time in the water, but we spent even more time on the slide. We were really into Harry Potter as kids; maybe you've noticed there are lots of stone slides in those books. We'd pretend the slide was the slide that went from

the bathroom to the dungeons ("Watch out for the basilisk!" we'd scream) or the one that whooshes you to the tunnel that goes to Hogsmeade ("Butterbeer, here we come!"). Or it was the Hogwarts stairs playing pranks and flattening themselves into a slide ("Silly stairs!"). I was always Hermione and Barry was always Harry (in fact, he crafted his name out of Harry and the first letter of his dead name). When She Who Must Not Be Named revealed herself to be a TERF, it killed Barry. Not the way the virus killed Barry; not the way I was worried Barry would kill himself several times over the years; not the way I was worried some hate-filled stranger was going to kill Barry, but still, it killed him in its own way. He almost considered changing his name again, but by then, Barry was as much a part of him as his own liver.

The slide used to have two humps halfway down, which divided it into three sections, the only triple slide I know. But so many kids got hurt, they shaved the humps down to make one wide slide. Kind of like top surgery, now that I think of it. The slide resembles the one at Mountain Lake Park, but it's a bit rougher around the edges, less prettied up. I like it that way. It makes me think our molecules might still be here from all our various abrasions. It makes me think I can breathe in some of Barry's atoms still whirling through the air.

Depending on when you visit Slide Hill, you may see a trebuchet being assembled and put into action. You may see people dressed in armor, or

various objects being hurled. You may watch pumpkins fly and wonder if that's a metaphor for something, for letting go, maybe, or for trying to fly and crashing to the ground. You may tell yourself not to impose metaphors on everything, especially on slides, which have such negative connotations (going downhill, etc.). You may try to focus on the rush, the thrill, not all the things it can mean to plummet (watching vitals plummet over FaceTime, feeling your heart plummet when your brother's partner hands you the list of all these slides with a header indicating Barry wanted to visit them with you). You may remember Slide Hill is an Open Container Ordinance area. You were way too young to take advantage of this when you lived in Davis—you'd never had a sip of alcohol in your life, didn't know what "Open Container Ordinance" meant. You may be tempted to buy a bottle of wine and spend more time here, sitting and drinking and breathing in atoms, but you have one last stop to make.

**Seward Mini-Park**

For our final destination, we will return to San Francisco, an hour and twenty-three minutes away. Make sure you get an early start if you want to do this tour all in one day—the Seward Mini-Park closes at 5:00 pm, a metal gate locked over the slides. Also, make sure you don't do this tour on a Monday, the only day of the week the Seward Mini-Park is closed. Also, be sure to find safe places to use the bathroom and eat as you go from slide

to slide. (I recommend packing food and disposable gloves, along with your mask and hand sanitizer. And maybe an adult diaper if you really don't want to use public facilities, but that's up to you.)

The Seward Mini-Park is a hidden jewel tucked into a residential area behind Castro Village. The land was supposed to be developed into a big apartment complex, but the neighbors stopped it: two different projects, two different times. When a third developer tried to get the lot, neighbors held a sit-in to block the bulldozers and prevailed again. San Francisco Rec and Park ended up buying the land, and the steep, curvy, double concrete slide was built in 1973, the design of a fourteen-year-old girl who won a contest judged by the sculptor Ruth Agawa. Just goes to show you—concrete slides are indeed works of art. Some more than others. This one most of all.

Barry loved the history. I was around fourteen myself when he brought me here and told me the story all over again. "People can make a difference if they work together," he reminded me. "Kids can make a difference." It was while we were waiting in line for the slide that he first told me he was trans, that he first told me he was Barry. This was before he told our parents, before they kicked him out. The news didn't surprise me. "You're a wizard, Barry," I said, and gave him a big hug, and then it was our turn. We held hands, whooping, all the way down.

There's a sign at the little park: "No adults unless accompanied by a child." Sometimes no one is around and you can go down by yourself, no problem. Sometimes the people who are there don't mind. Sometimes a mom will point to the sign and tell you to leave. Sometimes a child will see you crying and will say, "You can go with me."

RESPONSES

# A Complicated Grief

*S. Kirk Walsh*

This used to be the sad part of the story, but now it's one of the lucky parts: I woke up at 4:00 am on November 19, 2019, boarded a flight for Detroit, and drove to Beaumont Hospital, where my dad was being transferred into hospice. I stepped inside his room, fell on my knees, and held his almost lifeless hand. His arms were wrapped in white adhesive bandages. Here and there, his skin was exposed, a mottled black-and-blue landscape of wounds, many weeping. These large, fluid-filled blisters covered most of his body—hands, feet, arms, back, abdomen. He had a rare skin disorder called bullous pemphigoid, which had surfaced a few weeks after he underwent knee-replacement surgery. The blisters—and the necessary treatment, heavy doses of steroids—led to this: a-fib, a blood clot in his left lung, kidneys no longer supporting dialysis, other failing organs, last rites more than once. The stiff black stitches from his surgery still traversed the bend of his knee because he never recovered enough to have them removed.

My sister, Ami, and I spent the night by our dad's side. At six the next morning, a nurse brought in a trolley of individually sealed donuts—glazed, plain, and a couple covered in chocolate and nuts—as well as a thermos of coffee and a basket of sugar packets, creamers, and stirrers. For most of his life, my dad had been a loyal consumer of donuts, even after he was diagnosed with diabetes. He would buy a bag of donut holes and pop them in his mouth, one by one as he was driving to the office, to church, to do errands. The hospital coffee was weak and bland, but that morning, it tasted

as good as any I'd ever had. I alternated sips with bites of donut and held my dad's hand. Ami slept on a nearby couch, a thin hospital sheet and a cotton blanket pulled up to her chin. Our dad's death rattle filled the room: a loud gurgle, like the persistent percolation of an old electric pot. Despite my deep sadness and grief, I felt an unexpected levity, muted shades of joy and gratitude, and a profound sense of love for my dad and my sister.

An hour later, our dad died. He waited for our stepmom, Beverly. That morning, she returned to his room like a pristine breeze, wearing a brilliant blue scarf that our father loved. Within fifteen minutes of Beverly's arrival, the three of us surrounded his hospital bed, held his limp hands and each other's hands, and recited the Our Father together. As we said "Amen," he took his final breath—and his spirit was released.

Just like that.

He was gone.

*

Here's another lucky part of the story: The week after my dad's death, I flew home to Austin. It was Thanksgiving week, and everyone was rushing from one place to the next. Because of my father's death, I was moving at a different pace, as if submerged underwater, everything quiet and muffled, just out of reach.

In the grocery store checkout, the middle-aged woman behind the register asked how my holiday was going, and I responded, "Not so great."

"Oh, why?" she asked, placing my groceries into a paper bag.

"There's been a death in the family." The words slipped out of my mouth.

"Was it expected?"

"It depends on which way you look at it."

And she said, "I know. I lost two sons."

The ambient noise of the busy grocery store fell away. A few tears slid down my cheeks.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "That's a different kind of hard."

She looked up. "No, it's all hard. I'm so sorry for your loss. Take care of yourself."

The following day, the barista at my favorite coffee place asked about my

holiday. Because I had lost the capacity for small talk, I told him that my dad had died. The barista stared at me for an extended moment and said, "I lost my dad when I was young. I miss him all the time."

A week later, it was a manicurist. She asked about my day, and the tears returned again. She patted my shoulder and asked what was wrong. I told her that I was getting my nails done—something that I do maybe once or twice a year—for my father's funeral. She spoke to her coworker, then patted my shoulder again. "I miss my family," she said. "I haven't seen them in the seven years since I moved from my country."

When I left the salon, she hugged me several times. "You take good care," she went on. "It will be okay."

I recognize, now, that each one of these strangers was saying to me: "Here is a little bit of my grief. Take it. Then, you don't have to be so alone with yours."

*

Toward the end of January 2020, my mom stopped eating. I had returned to Detroit to clean out my dad's things in the house he shared with my stepmom. She was getting the house ready to sell. During this stay, my sister and I visited my mom several times at her nursing home and noticed that she'd become weaker and less responsive. For the past seven years, she'd been suffering from an acute and debilitating depression and PTSD that left her in bed most of the time; she'd come to this nursing home after countless psychiatric ward stays, thirty-plus electroshock treatments, and four different residential facilities. A week later, barely two months after my dad died, she was moved into hospice. It was as if he had pushed open the door for her—and she walked right through it. All this despite the fact that my parents had divorced forty-nine years before.

The following week, my sister and I spent five days with our mom and her younger sister, Julie. The huff and pull of the oxygen machine filled the room. The transparent nubs of the two-pronged cannula kept slipping out of her withered nostrils, and her face was puffy and pallid. Her eyelids fluttered now and again. As I held her hand, I focused on adjusting the plastic nubs to ensure that oxygen was being delivered. As we waited, I listened to

the predictable cadences of the machine and my mom's breathing. It was so different from what had happened with my dad. No death rattle, no failing organs, no clockwork administration of morphine, no recitation of prayers. Just the slowing of her breath and my mom's consciousness stealing out of her, like air seeping from a worn balloon.

*

The last time my siblings and I were together was the weekend of March 13, at our mother's funeral. I found an Airbnb for us, a cozy bungalow on a narrow canal that spilled into the Detroit River. Large chunks of ice collected along its gray shores. With each hour, the situation was changing: Should we cancel the service? Or go ahead and only include family? With the church, we agreed on a ceremony with no more than fifty guests. My sister changed the catering order. We printed fewer programs and called our mom's friends to tell them the service wouldn't be public due to the coronavirus.

Between the planning and the meals, we watched The Right Stuff. The running time is three hours and thirteen minutes, and we sat on the overstuffed couch, dipping in and out of the film throughout the weekend as news rolled in about the pandemic: the NBA canceling its season, museums and restaurants closing in New York, American citizens returning from Europe, cases multiplying swiftly within an Orthodox Jewish community in New Rochelle. To watch a movie about astronauts launched into space was strangely soothing amid the collapse of the world. Hollywood and history gave us something the twenty-four-hour news cycle couldn't—a predictability, a steadiness, an end to the story we already knew.

On the morning of March 14, our mother's funeral was followed by a simple reception in the church basement. We touched elbows rather than hugged. We squirted hand sanitizer into our palms often. We talked about the museums and restaurants that had been shut down. That evening, my siblings and I ate at one of our father's favorite restaurants in downtown Detroit. The pandemic still didn't seem real. The restaurant was at capacity and bustling with people and conversation. It felt like any other Saturday night. We traded stories of our mom and dad. We laughed and we ate. As

we said goodbye, we discussed seeing each other over the summer for our mom's interment ceremony and a scattering of ashes in Little Traverse Bay. We didn't know the pandemic would keep us apart. We didn't know that our mother's ashes would remain in a box in a funeral home in Detroit indefinitely. We didn't know this would be the last "normal" thing we would do.

*

"Grief is so long and so mutable," wrote a friend, who lost his thirty-seven-year-old sister to an aneurysm in 1995. "Any bit of light is good. I think the dark parts are good, too. It is what it takes. God is your co-sufferer." I wrote down these sentences—and others—in an attempt to understand the grief that was coming and going during those early months of isolation. As the deaths mounted, the geography of grief became infinite; it held no boundaries, and it was hard to know where my private grief ended and the collective public grief began. It was the Sahara Desert. It was the Pacific Ocean. It was the distance between Earth and the moon, ten times over. It was the endless list of names and details on the front page of The New York Times. "Great-grandmother with an easy laugh," "sharecropper's son," "known for serenading friends with Tony Bennett songs."

*

The first time I was around people—other than my husband, our neighbor, and the few friends who came to visit in our backyard—occurred at the end of February 2021 when I volunteered at the University of Texas's Gregory Gym. In January, the site had been transformed into a mass vaccination site: the intake area where a masked team sat behind folding tables with keyboards and computer monitors; the observation area dotted with socially distanced folding chairs; the area, at the far end, where the vaccines were administered by a team of nurses and medical students.

For five hours, my job was to stand at the border of the vaccine area and

guide individuals to observation, where they sat for fifteen minutes. (At the end of my shift, I received my first vaccine shot.) The operation moved efficiently, people coming and going, the many masks reflecting a variety of personalities (Texas flag, tie-dye of pastel colors, tiny coins of glittery sequins, Dallas Cowboys, U.S. Marines, an embroidery of vibrant flowers, Black Lives Matter). The nurses supervised the continuous flow of humans with the skill and precision of world-class symphony conductors. Most of these individuals were older, over seventy. In several cases, adult children led their parents through the massive operation, pushing wheelchairs, escorting them, arm in arm, to the observation area, carrying their tote bags, their purses, their cherished vaccination cards.

I felt a sadness and a joy witnessing this care and attention, the love that happens when our parents age. It's a complicated love with deep recesses of pain. I recalled visits with my mom at the nursing home, after her depression had stolen most of her spirit, the two of us walking down the hallway only halfway, before her anxiety drove us back into her room. In October 2019, the last time he was conscious, I was with my dad when he was hooked up to a chorus of beeping machines and a web of transparent IV tubes. It was Sunday morning, and he was watching Mass on a closed-circuit television in the far corner of the hospital room.

"O Lord, I beseech you," my dad whispered, his weathered hands folded in his lap. "I beseech you, O Lord." Outside, on the other side of the window, morning light traveled through a profusion of autumn leaves. A few hours later, when it came time for me to say goodbye and return to Austin, my dad said, "I love you, sweet pea. Thank you for coming."

That afternoon in February, as I stood in the Gregory Gym, tears wet my eyes. I was grateful to be among strangers, to be experiencing my grief differently, grateful that it was somehow rearranging itself in a way that was not possible when I sat alone at my desk at home, staring at my laptop screen. I got a chance to be among hundreds of strangers as they began to cross the threshold to safety. It may not have been the same as those intimate exchanges with strangers in the aftermath of my dad's death, but at least it was something outside of myself, something that I couldn't manufacture on my own.

One woman said to me, after receiving her shot, "You can't see it, but I'm smiling under this mask." She couldn't see my smile either. The afternoon sunlight illuminated funnels of motes that floated through the air of the cav-

ernous gym. My feet hurt.

My heart hurt, too, but in a good way.

*

"Yours is a complicated grief," a priest said to me after I mentioned that my parents died ten weeks apart. We were making arrangements for my mom's interment in late July 2021. I'm beginning to understand that my grief isn't just one thing, that it can be many things at once. It is the silent swish of a great horned owl taking flight at dusk. It is the deep purple of blooming mountain laurel. It is the sweet taste of vanilla frosting. It is the length of my fingers, how the sight reminds me of my mother's hands. It is the voices no longer on the other end of the phone each Sunday afternoon. It is the memories of childhood buoying into my consciousness, the sweet and the traumatic, reminding me that my mom and my dad were complicated also, that they were not just one thing.

*

Life continues to press on—another round of seasons, of pandemic birthdays, more anniversaries, more deaths and births. A niece lost her front tooth. A friend's metastatic breast cancer returned. My husband's father underwent multiple brain surgeries and miraculously survived. One morning, at sunrise, I spotted my first scissor-tailed flycatcher of the spring season, high up on a utility wire that borders the neighborhood public golf course, with its long, deeply forked tail. My first novel was published in April. A few days later, I invited a small group of friends to our backyard for a celebration. I signed a few copies. We ate cake. Three of my friends were fully vaccinated—and we were able to hug one another. The embraces felt sturdy and fleeting. Foreign and familiar at once.

Any bit of light is good.

*

In late July, my husband and I finally flew to Michigan, and I saw my siblings for the first time in sixteen months. We picked up our mom's ashes from the funeral home on Mack Avenue in Grosse Pointe and drove forty-five minutes to Christ Church Cranbrook in Bloomfield Hills. The priest greeted my family and a few friends in the Easter Garden. Enormous pine trees towered over us as the dissonant sounds of construction vibrated from the rear of the church. She spoke about the long wait for this sacred ceremony to inter our mom and then said a few prayers. My aunt read another prayer and talked about our mom, and each of us placed a single scoop of ashes into the ground amid a circle of evergreens. Afterward, a spray of white roses was placed on the spot where our mom's ashes were buried. Nearby, a plaque read: Rest eternal grant to them, o lord and let light perpetual shine on them.

It was only a fifteen-minute ceremony, but it was monumental—putting our mom where she belonged. Afterward, my siblings, my husband, and I ate deli sandwiches at a table in front of the church and then went for a walk around Cranbrook Lake. The last time I saw my mom before her breakdown in the fall of 2012 was to take this same walk. I remembered the synchronicity of our footfalls as we took in the blooming black-eyed Susans, germaniums, begonias, lilies, and a wandering family of geese feeding on the slope of grass. I remembered that we walked mostly in silence.

Two days later, we scattered the rest of our mother's ashes in Little Traverse Bay in Northern Michigan, where we used to vacation when my siblings and I were small. It was raining as my sister, my brother, and I waded onto a sandbar. The cold water rose above our knees. Smooth furrows of sand were visible beneath our feet. The rain fell a little harder. We each said a few words and then sprinkled some ashes into the water before my brother emptied the remainder of the bag. The powdery bits of bone and skin sank onto the contours of the lake floor, and for a moment, something about the water and the ash and the temperature changed the color of our mother, coalescing into a soft phosphorescence, glowing under the water's rippling veneer. There she is. An illuminated mass of robin's-egg blue. As if the organic matter of our mom were alive and dead at the same time. As if she were right there with us whispering, "Thank you for finally bringing me here. Thank you."

The glow began to dull as the ashes settled further. We waded toward the shoreline, where there were empty beach chairs—and I began to cry. My sister and brother paused, and the three of us hugged out there amid the subdued blues and grays of Lake Michigan.

"We don't have to go in yet," my brother said. "We can stay out here as long as you need to." And we did. Huddled in an embrace, the three of us, waves pressing around our legs. After a few minutes, we walked together to the shoreline.

I never expected such a feeling of intimacy and grace from these rituals. For so many months, it was just something that I thought would never come. Scheduled for one date, and then changed again. Some part of me knew that these ceremonies are more for the living than they are for the dead, but I didn't realize how this moment—and being with my siblings again—would give a new shape to my grief, give it more movement, velocity, and depth. As we walked onto the rain-stippled sand on that familiar curve of beach in Northern Michigan, the deaths of our parents began to live, for me, a little more in the past rather than in the present. I began to feel a little free.

*

After our trip to Michigan, I was saddened to return to Texas. As soon as my husband and I stepped off the plane, a young man—the muscular bulge of his biceps visible under the tight sleeves of his T-shirt—slipped off his mask and strutted down the fluorescent-lit corridor of the Austin airport. Welcome back to Texas, he seemed to say with his defiant body language. Don't tread on me.

When I am feeling optimistic, I want to believe we'll be able to overcome this someday, that we'll return to the patterns of our former lives. This, too, is a form of grieving, and a way of coming to terms. Spontaneous exchanges will become a part of our daily lives again. Fleeting moments of recognition. A smile, a soft laugh, eyes glistening with tears. We'll say to each other without saying it: *Here is a little bit of my grief. Take it. Then, you don't have to be so alone with yours.*

# Contributors

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Amina Cruz was born and raised in Los Angeles, CA and Tampa, FL. She hitchhiked around the country before deciding to move to New York City, where she earned her BFA in Photography from Parsons School of Design. Her interests are based in queer culture, film/analog photography, and exploring the space between transformation and identity. Her current work explores the culture of brown queer punks, on the east side of Los Angeles. Amina volunteers at various community organizations. She has been an active panelist at MOLA and La Plaza de Cultura y Artes. Her work has appeared in multiple television shows and features.

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Edwin Ushiro creates work that resonates with the echoes of his boyhood in the "slow town" of Wailuku on the Hawaiian island of Maui. In his paintings, he recalls the sun-struck days of youth, when the world was fresh and magical, but also explores the eerie folklore indigenous to dark country roads and the boundless depths of the childhood imagination. Working in a mixed media style that involves laboring in ink and acrylic over sheets of Lucite printed with assemblages of his drawings and paintings, he creates reflections on the past that are luminous and nostalgic, like cherished memories burnished by the passage of time.

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