

COSMOVISIONS

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Cosmovisions is a collection that seeks to unravel, then weave together, inherited worldviews using a hybrid approach. The work comments on the narrator's lived experiences of place, identity, and the natural world by zooming in on "in-between" spaces, focusing on speculative elements and desire, and mixing genres. This work seeks to play with inherited *cosmovisions*, or worldviews, in order to create its own playful and experimental space.

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For my loves, my family, the women, and the Earth.

“I am from where I was born.
I am from where I am right now.
I am from all the places that I have been.
I am from all the places that I will be.
But above all, I am that place gathering
Selected, subjective poetry
on my own trail.”

-Josefina Baez, *Comrade, Bliss ain't playing*

THESIS AS RITUAL

This is a memory I have circled for a while: the power in New York City went out, and I saw the night sky for the first time. I think I am obsessed with it because that night was a complete recalibration of all I thought I knew about where I was in time and space.

The ritual of thesis writing felt a little like a recalibration too. Everything turned back into a question. Where are we? What is a city? How does memory work? What stories does a mountain contain? A coffee mug? What even is a story? How can we time travel within it? How can we make it sing? Most importantly, what happens when we ask these questions together?

During this ritual, I got to spend time discussing making things with poets Pat Rosal and Marie Scarles. I inherited their questions and the questions they came into contact with—How can we write like we are flying? How can an instrument sound like water? What is an image? What objects hold charge for you? What do you want? What happens when you speak to ghosts?

THE ONLY WAR THAT MATTERS IS THE WAR AGAINST THE IMAGINATION / ALL OTHER WARS ARE SUBSUMED IN IT, Diane di Prima rants.

At the beginning of this ritual, I felt constrained. I said it was because of the world's turmoil and the physical stay-at-home orders, but my imagination was constrained too.

W/out imagination there can be no will, desire.

At times during this ritual, I have felt my imagination run wild, and this leaves me feeling light and free. I have augmented photos with images that intrigue me—koi swimming in the sunset over Philly rowhouses, imagined shapes of the universe over a dark night sky, and a rock that is also a portal. I have zoomed in on bricks in my dreams. I have invented a lineage that goes back one hundred years.

How to protect and expand my own imagination, how to welcome the unexpected, and how to collaborate with others—these are the most precious lessons I am taking from this ritual.

I want to leave behind both more questions and more possibilities.

For example, from a long, meandering conversation over time: How is power a cage? What does it feel like to fall apart? What new things will you want after you go through the process of setting yourself free?

Answer in whatever way you want.

Vaccine for a City in Flux

The first time I saw the stars in night sky was during the Northeast Blackout of 2003. I was ten. With the city lights dimmed in seven surrounding states plus parts of Canada, the Milky Way extended one glorious arm across the canyon of Mulberry Street. There were no cars, no streetlights, no glowing windows. Instead, the flashlights of all of my reverently quiet neighbors illuminated the sidewalk. The white orbs of light they produced gave the ground the impression of the bottom of the ocean on a sunny day.

It was rare to see my neighbors. I spent my adolescence in a former tenement building in Nolita, nestled between Soho and Little Italy, in a ground floor apartment reserved for the superintendent (my father) and his family (my mother, my sister, me). There were a couple of characters in the building that remained the same throughout the years: George, the chain-smoking WWII vet who wore a silk bomber jacket stuffed with angry chihuahuas, and Nancy, a short-haired middle-aged editor on rent control. Otherwise, the building was a revolving door of young, well dressed professionals in their twenties and thirties. Everyone mostly kept to themselves.

It was rare to see stars too. There was the night in high school I jogged along the Hudson River and saw a bubblegum-colored sky over New Jersey. There was the week that a film crew was shooting a movie outside my bedroom window. They used floodlights to simulate daylight so that they could shoot on emptier streets. I could usually see a few of the brightest stars, some of the planets, and the moon, but that was about it.

Here is a story I can relate to. In 1994, an Earthquake knocked the power out in Los Angeles just before dawn. Some startled residents stumbled outside. Emergency centers and a local observatory got an unprecedented number of calls that reported a mysterious cloud overhead. The mysterious cloud turned out to be the Milky Way.

The realization that there is so much above *is* an emergency.

I tried to make up for lost time by traveling to the Hayden Planetarium, then attending a school with a planetarium, then sitting in on lectures at the Columbia Observatory. I didn't experience the natural sublime in these places, but I learned a bunch of stories about the natural world.

For example, I learned that when turtle hatchlings emerge, they instinctually crawl towards the brightest light. Originally, they followed the moonlight toward their lives in the ocean, but these days the brass-colored skyglow from Miami beckons from the opposite direction.



The front of my old middle school, The Salk School of Science, looks so much like a gothic castle that it was featured on a show about witches. A lot of what happened in there did feel like magic.

We learned about the moon and how it was born. Some say it was launched out of the molten, rapidly spinning earth. Some say it was adopted—a stray asteroid taken in by the Earth’s magnetic field. Some think it was knocked from the Earth’s ribs by another planet in the primordial soup. Theories abound. In any case, it’s a good thing those two masses found each other, because in their little dance, the tides of the waters of our city of islands found their level.

The Salk School of Science is located on Second Avenue in Gramercy. It is a quick walk to the East River where one can commune with those waters—past the darkened buildings of Stuyvesant town, the noisy FDR drive, and its neighboring powerplant.

Beyond it all there was a strip of sand, a former pier on the bank of the East River, left unused. After school, my classmates and I used to toss our backpacks over the fence onto the sand and climb after them. On this little beach and abandoned pier, we dreamed, away from standardized tests and our looming futures.



The school’s namesake, Jonas Salk, developed the first effective polio vaccine in 1952. This was a necessary invention, as polio reached epidemic proportions in the United States during the late 18th and early 19th century. Though some believe that the polio virus has lived among humans since 1400 BCE, when an Egyptian carving depicting a paralyzed man was etched.

In a small percentage of cases, polio causes permanent paralysis. My father, who grew up in the Dominican Republic in the 1950s, had a cousin who was infected by the virus in childhood and remained in a wheelchair for the rest of her life. In the most severe cases, the throat or the diaphragm may become paralyzed, making it impossible for the patient to breathe. In these cases, a patient might be transferred to an iron lung, a metal chamber that compressed and depressed the air inside the patient, allowing them to breathe.

According to polls in the years following WWII, the only thing Americans feared more than nuclear war was polio. No one knew exactly how it spread at the time. I imagine parents corralling their children after they played outside and imploring them to wash their hands. I imagine people lying awake in bed and dreaming up new ways to keep their families safe. I imagine people opening up the newspaper and seeing the latest report from the CDC, following the increasing number of cases with a growing sense of dread.



In 2013, I met a friend for breakfast near the Salk School of Science. It was early in the morning, and I was curious about the little strip of sand of my youth. I wanted to see the sunrise over the old pier that jugged out into the lapping waves of the river, where I used to uncurl my little spine under the sun. I wanted to see if my name was still written on the seawall in glittery-pink graffiti pen.

There was the time where my friend, Annie, dropped her wallet into the river and dove in, headfirst, after it. I wanted to verify this memory against what was actually there. Was the place where she dove in still as treacherous as I remembered? Would my adult self be horrified?

Just the year before this final visit, Hurricane Sandy had ravaged the city. I was away at college in Maine but stared incredulously at the images of cars in Alphabet City under water, flooded subway stops, and the bike path underneath the FDR drive consumed by the river. For days, I carried with me a growing sense of dread.

I wasn't thinking about that when I walked the familiar path, through Stuyvesant town, past the powerplant, underneath the highway. When I arrived at the spot, the water reached the very edge of the seawall, almost, but not quite spilling over onto the bike path. There was no island, no exposed old concrete pier I could walk to, it was all underwater. I could make out where it used to be because some of the pier's old wooden posts jutted out of the water.



But isn't that just the case of growing up in a place like New York City? The architecture of physical memories gets replaced, sometimes imperceptibly, sometimes all at once. I grew up in Soho, the capital of fast fashion and ever-changing storefronts.

One day a storefront could be a place to play, then a bookstore, then an expensive churro spot, then a bar, then a sneaker store, then nothing at all. The building I grew up in was sold to a luxury developer while I was in college and all of the tenants were kicked out, just like that. Five years later, it remains unoccupied.

What to do with these memories if I cannot point them out as I walk? I am still fairly young, and I already feel like a curmudgeon when I walk with company, interrupting conversations to explain what used to be there *back in my day*.

Sooner or later, all of it will cease to be entirely. Scientists predict the sea level to rise by 6 feet by 2100, rendering the streets of my youth completely uninhabitable in 80 years.



I, like you, am doing the best I can with this information. On most days, I don't know what I can offer to make the effects of all of this change—whether it be from gentrification, or climate change—less heavy. Today I offer what I can: these memories of what was there and what still is. I could have never imagined the pandemic that was to come.



Americans, so obsessed with their heroes and geniuses, debate whether it was Jonas Salk, with his tedious three booster vaccine in 1952, or Albert Sabin, with his sleeker and more effective oral vaccine in 1962 that *really* saved the nation.

Couldn't they both have?

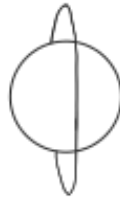
In addition to the effort of thousands working in tandem—the principal investigators, their wives, the lab techs, their cousins, the cleaning staff, the animal husbandry staff, the lab rats, the patients, the nurses, everyone they were ever connected to, and so on?



Jonas Salk's words have been coming up on my social media feeds recently in relation to the global pandemic we are living through. Specifically, I see Salk's 1955 quote where CBS newsman Edward R. Murrow asks who owns the patent for the newly discovered polio vaccine. Salk replies, "Well, the people, I would say. There is no patent. Could you patent the sun?"

These words feel like a salve in this current moment, where, as of this writing, there have been over 300,000 deaths to COVID-19 in the United States. That number is climbing, still. COVID-19 is exponentially deadlier than polio, which, at its height, killed 3,000 Americans.

In that harrowing and expected way, COVID-19 deaths disproportionately affect low-income communities of color. One morning in the Spring, at the height of the first wave, I saw a picture of a crowded 2 train in Brooklyn. Packed together like sardines in a can were the brown faces of essential workers in the city. I thought of my mother commuting to her job at the hospital.



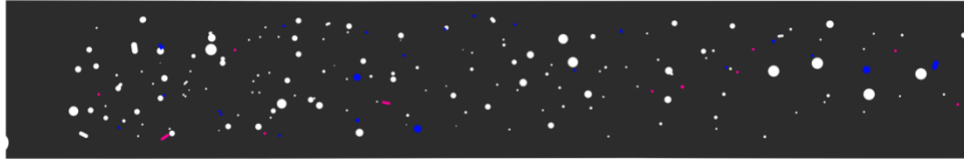
Please, let us create the antidote. Let it be warm, generous, and powerful as the sun.



I didn't expect to write an essay about death. I wanted to write an essay about my island, my refuge. That refuge is gone. I wanted to write about the waters, but they are finding their new level. I wanted to write an essay about my city. But how to write about this city

without mentioning the avarice that relegated it to memory? I wanted to write about a hero. But how to write about a hero without invoking us all?





I wouldn't see the Milky Way like I did in 2003 again until 2011, when I left New York City for a liberal arts college in coastal Maine. This college, with its multi-billion-dollar endowment, owned a gorgeous island in a bay full of bioluminescent plankton. One night I swam in the waters surrounding the island. The plankton's little bodies lit up using the energy of my moving limbs. I was caught in a sea of light.

I was stayed in Maine the summer after my sophomore year transcribing interviews for an anthropology professor. I can't help but look back at this time and smile. That summer, I learned how to ride a bike to the ocean. I learned how to start a campfire and cook dinner over it. I was painfully in love with a friend who was painfully in love with a different friend. I jumped off rope swings and read poems by a lake. I climbed a water tower in the dead of night and watched a meteor shower.

In her sun-dappled office one afternoon, my professor shared insights about a famous drawing by Juan de Santa Cruz Pachacuti drawn in 1619 that portrayed the world as a space-time house.

She explained a few of the premises of the Andean Relational Cosmovision: (1) everything is related, nothing can exist on its own, nor can be abstracted, (2) Opposites do not exclude each other, but coexist as a dual whole, (3) One thing simply cannot be without its opposite: feminine is not without masculine, day is not without night, peace is not without conflict, (4) Every relation—human, non-human, or spiritual, is built upon reciprocity.

I mention this not to romanticize the Andean cosmovision, but to share that the first premise, of interrelatedness, is similar to the cosmovision on which I was raised. Both my parents were born on subsistence farms in the countryside of their homelands: Ecuador and the Dominican Republic. They often described things in the natural world as if they were animated and in relation to us: *La tierra se mueve, el agua encuentra su nivel*.

There is a tension between this view and a Western understanding of nature: as somehow separate from culture. I want to use this lens to understand why my young self felt so strongly that being able to see the night sky and play in nature was necessary to her growth as a human, despite living in a city.

Photo by Matthew Kashtan taken at Cherry Springs State Park, International Dark Sky Zone, August 10th, 2019.

Images traced from:

Pachacuti Yamqui's explanation of the organization of the Temple of the Sun, ~1610.

Nicolaus Copernicus's diagram of the heliocentric model from "On the Revolutions of Heavenly Spheres", 1543.

Katahdin

The words that appear in italics are from Henry David Thoreau's essay *Ktaadn* (1864).

On the 31st of August, 1846, I left Concord in Massachusetts for Bangor and the backwoods of Maine, by way of the railroad and steamboat, intending to accompany a relative of mine engaged in the lumber-trade in Bangor, as far as a dam on the west branch of the Penobscot, in which property he was interested.

On the 4th of August, 2013, I left my college campus in Brunswick, Maine for Baxter State Park almost six hours north, by way of grey Subaru, intending to accompany my roommate Sophie—a Colorado girl with a turquoise nose ring and comfortable sandals, our friend Courtney—a geology major with short sandy hair who planned our entire expedition, and her friend Melissa—a senior girl with stylish glasses that made her look like an architect. I wanted a fun weekend in a new place, a break in the monotony of summer.

Ktaadn, whose name is an Indian word signifying highest land, was first ascended by white men in 1804. It was visited by Professor J. W. Bailey of West Point in 1836; by Dr. Charles T. Jackson, the State Geologist, in 1837; and by two young men from Boston in 1845. All these have given accounts of their expeditions.

These days, Baxter State Park welcomes over 30,000 visitors each year. From what I saw on our trip, many, but not all, of these visitors were white men. Every person I saw hiking the mountain appeared to be white.

I don't know how many women of color hike Katahdin each year. It has been eight years since I have hiked it and I couldn't find a number like this online. If all of those men believe sharing their account is so important, perhaps there is something to be found in them.

(This is my account.)

We had each a knapsack or bag filled with such clothing and articles as were indispensable, and my companion carried his gun.

Courtney and Melissa arrived at our dorm at dawn. I grabbed thin long-sleeved shirts and leggings and stuffed them in my bag for layering as I ran out of the back door. My backpack was a grey backpack from early high school. It was covered in pins, studs, and sharpie-ed stars. I made a pitstop at the fridge and filled it with Lime-O-Ritas and Allagash White.

Once we arrived at the campsite, Courtney taught me how to cook in the fire she built. We mixed chopped potatoes, cheese, beans, and veggies, seasoning, wrapped it all in tin foil, and threw these packs into the flames. The food, so simple, tasted better than

whatever I could have made indoors. We ate as the air around us turned indigo and it became hard to see. Then, we savored the metallic taste of the canned liquor and watched the stars swirl overhead.

Within a dozen miles of Bangor we passed through the villages of Stillwater and Oldtown, built at the falls of the Penobscot; which furnish the principal power by which the Maine woods are converted into lumber[...]

To this is to be added the lumber of the Kennebec, Androscoggin, Saco, Passamaquoddy, and other streams [...]

The mission of men there seems to be, like so many busy demons, to drive the forest all out of the country, from every solitary beaver—swamp and mountain—side, as soon as possible.

The Androscoggin. It was short bike ride down Maine Street from Bowdoin's campus, and I visited weekly while I lived there. There is a little bank under an orange walking bridge where once, during finals week, I picked up a handful of glittering sand and threw it into the water with rage and exhaustion. The water accepted it with a gentle hiss. A lesson for me.

There was the boy born and raised in Maine who made art in the old factory overlooking the river. As we drank coffee near the factory, he told me that it once was so full of lumber that workers easily walked across the river. He wanted to get a tattoo of a white pine on his forearm someday. I wonder if he ever did.

As we left the shore, I observed a short, shabby, washerwoman—looking Indian—they commonly have the woe-begone look of the girl that cried for spilt milk... The church is the only trim-looking building, but that is not Abenaki, that was Rome's doings. Good Canadian it may be, but it is poor Indian. These were once a powerful tribe. Politics are all the rage with them now. I even thought that a row of wigwams, with a dance of powwows, and a prisoner tortured at the stake, would be more respectable than this.

I first read these words in a graduate class about literature and the environment where I was the only woman of color in the room. We were reading about a white colonizer looking at a woman he did not know, and all Thoreau, the creep, wanted her to do was smile for him, to dance for him, to torture someone so he could watch.

This passage stung to read. I read it aloud in class for us to explore in that sun-drenched seminar room and I felt my own heart rattle in my chest. I wanted to say, *this hurts to read*. I wanted to say *I need validation that this is fucked up*. But I knew that wasn't what a grad school seminar was for.

The professor deftly changed the subject, and the class went back to talking about the natural sublime and the apocalypse. But how could we talk about the violence committed against the earth without talking about the dehumanization of its people?

Each week in that classroom, my peers dreamed up such unique and vivid ways that the human-caused apocalypse would occur. I was always surprised by the creativity in their visions of the end of the world—an underwater sea monster fed by toxins, the Earth’s slow consumption by the sun, or a flood that ended the human race all at once.

“I didn’t want to waste my time on a white man who treated Indians like relics or savages or tokens or devices for a white male protagonist to imbue with meaning”, writes Therese Mailhot. I didn’t want to either. Studying literature in the university meant the perspective of the white male colonizer would be reiterated and legitimized, again and again, one thousand branching fractals of the same old story, a vision that distorted any story that resembled my own, or at least pushed it so far into the margins it could not be seen.

Mailhot, again: “I’m saying that a woman doesn’t have to read all the books deemed “necessary” by the white literary world to be a writer. If a classroom has made learning impossible or violent, she can still be a writer. That simple.”

Simple races, as savages, do not climb mountains, — their tops are sacred and mysterious tracts never visited by them. Pomola is always angry with those who climb to the summit of Ktaadn.

As we began the trek up the mountain, an older white man with not one but two elaborate walking sticks and a backpack on a large frame trailed us. He chose to focus his attention on me.

“Are you going to hike in that?”, he asked me, I think referring to my borrowed boots and old backpack, “you don’t have nearly enough gear. I would recommend turning back now and coming back when you are ready”.

I slowed to let him pass, but he lingered.

Several hours up the mountain, the granite rocks became the size of people. A boulder field in the sky. I grabbed onto their craggy, granite faces and scrambled to the top. By the time we reached knife’s edge, my legs were Jell-O. It wasn’t my gear or lack of it that made this trek difficult. Any more gear than the water bottle and apple I carried in my old backpack and I would have chunked all of my things off the mountain.

From Knife’s Edge, the sky was pale blue, with adorable wisps of clouds just feet away from me. The sun was gentle, and the air was crisp. I could see as far as vision goes, all of the sky, all of the land, and a deep abyss, on either side of me. I was careful to only look up in glimpses when my footing was stable. Mostly, I focused on channeling my last bit of coordination to get my shaking body across the narrow bridge of rocks.

I had no idea, at the time, that according to the Penobscot and Abenaki, Katahdin’s summit was inhabited by a legendary bird spirit associated with cold weather, wind, night, and storms. The spirit resented mortals intruding from down below, meaning that the summit of Katahdin was off limits, it was too dangerous. When Thoreau summited,

the weather was terrible. When my friends and I got to the top, we were lucky with the weather.

Here is the trail, here is the path, these are the vistas, push yourself to the limit, get in the car, go home. I realize that I, too, participated in that masculosexual ritual of walking to a “climax” of land, in order to symbolically conquer it. Where did I get the idea that the summit is the most important part of the journey? Couldn’t there be other ways to relate to mountains? To wind? To clouds?



Spruce Hill Ecosystem

One can consider the grey squirrel who undoes the gardener's tidy rows with the burying and subsequent forgetting of her foraged seeds a natural foe of the gardener for undoing his painstaking work / for plucking his ripest cherry tomatoes and savoring them slowly in her furry grey hands / for brazenly lifting the late summer fruit to her mandibles in the gutter of a rowhouse still warmed by the setting sun in a pinking sky / which she later uses as a ramp to walk into a Tree of Heaven / where the spotted lanternflies explode out of her path in a dazzling red display / that is / unless they have sought shelter in the branch's nodes / in which case they stick by the hundreds like stubborn skin-tags / catching the attention of the gardener who has waged war on them too / using a super soaker full of neem oil to knock them out for another generation / and the writer gives him a polite wave from her window / and remembers that all assembled here / the Tree of Heaven / the Gardener / the Writer / the Lanternflies / could be considered *invasive* / or / at least / still haven't quite learned the balance of things / it is really only the squirrel who has lived in this regions trees since the dawn of squirrels / whose prodigious burying and subsequent forgetting of seeds has given birth to new forests which have in turn given us breath / so / also / one can consider the squirrel the gardener's collaborator.



Trains parked under Bedford Park Boulevard train stop.

A family of raccoons lived on the exposed rocks in the background.

Wishes for Our Life on Earth

My old high school in the Bronx was meant to train the next generation of people interested in STEM. There were 3,000 of us, mostly children of immigrants from far flung parts of the city. People came from parts of Queens where the subway didn't even go, and some even took the ferry from Staten Island for their shot at a good public education. I travelled from the bottom of Manhattan. It took about an hour each way. Some people had it better, some people had it worse.

I can't help but look back at this time and feel exhausted. In my senior year, we were all given little plastic ID cards. They had our names and a nine-digit identification number. We used this to swipe into different parts of the school. The machines knew exactly where we were at all times. I was burnt out from waking up at six in the morning, before the sun, and getting home at 8pm after track practice, only to do several hours of busy work before bed.

One morning, in the dead of winter, I got off the train at Bedford Park Boulevard as I did on every other day. There was snow falling on the ground when I left my apartment, but the city had salted the streets downtown the night before and none of it was sticking. In the Bronx, the snow had already bonded to the concrete under the stampede of teenagers rushing to school. My sneakers couldn't get a grip on the ice below. My soles slid across the frozen city as the wind whipped sleet at my exposed face.

My friend and I steadied ourselves using the fence on the bridge over the train garage. Because it was so icy, we inched along slowly. When the fence ended, a crowd of students collapsed onto the ground in a heap. I think we would have laughed if it wasn't so cold and so early. At the moment when we fell, a salt truck passed by and pelted us with salt.

I arrived at school drenched with snow. I waited on the long line in to get to school. I scanned my ID card at the entrance. A machine printed out a receipt that read LATE PASS. I grabbed it and walked up the slippery steps to biology class.

In the hallway, the principal was patrolling. She asked to see my ID and late pass. She wrote my name down on a sheet of paper on her clip board.

"I am randomly selecting late students for detention. It is your lucky day," she told me.

"I guess so," I responded, and entered the laboratory.

Pop quiz, a multiple choice exam about biochemical synthesis. I didn't remember what this meant then, and I don't remember what it means now. I wanted to learn about life: the wind, the rocks, our hands. Emboldened by a quote by Ernesto Sábato I had read in Spanish class, I scribbled in the margins: "*Strict science—or mathematical science—is a stranger to all that is most valuable to a human being: their emotions, their sense of art or justice, their anguish in the face of death*".

The teacher, tired of my nonsense, wrote a question mark over it in red and subtracted ten points.

*

After college, I lived in Inwood and worked in an elementary school in the Bronx as a case manager for students with asthma. A large percentage of students at the school suffered from severe asthma due to many layers of environmental racism: the Cross Bronx Expressway introduced smog to their neighborhood, many lived in housing with indoor allergens and pests, it was difficult for them to get adequate quality healthcare.

For example, I was working out of a school nurse's office in the corner of the school that had not been updated since the 1940s. Its medical equipment would have looked right at home in a museum of medical history. A few months into my work there, the maintenance staff put yellow caution tape in front of the water fountain I used each day to refill my bottle—the water was declared unsuitable for drinking because of its high lead content.

I walked to Crotona Park on lunch breaks when the sun was out. There was exposed bedrock, which warmed up in the sun, even in the winter, and overlooked a duck-filled pond surrounded with phragmites. The park seemed like an oasis only a block away from the school, but the school banned their elementary school students from going there due to gang activity. If the students had been allowed to visit in the park, perhaps they would

have played and dreamed among goslings, turtles, red winged black birds, and the golden hues of fall.

It is not enough for me to think about conserving the environment in a way that preserves sections of it for recreation, devoid of people, and especially people of color. I am grateful to the environmental justice movement, an inter-generational, multi-racial, international movement, that has widened my ability to dream of the future that I have always desired. This movement, active all around the world, has broadened the perspective of the “environment” beyond the scope of conservation and preservation of natural resources and has defined the environment as “where we live, work, and play.” The environment is wherever we are, urban or rural.

Earlier on in the pandemic, I kept seeing memes that said in one way or another: “We are the real virus.” Meaning, that humans are the ones that are causing irreparable damage to the earth, and the flora and fauna would be better off without us. That there would be something more “pure” about a world without humans doesn’t sit well with me. There are ways for humans to live in relation to the nonhuman, to the past, present, and future.

So, why don’t we amplify our own universe?

Here are my wishes for our life on Earth, feel free to add yours:

Clean water, clean air, proper sanitation,
a living wage, healthcare, and a plant-filled home for all.

Universal access to a place to plant vegetables
and a place to stick your hands into the dirt

Swimmable urban rivers, humpbacks in the Hudson,

Fruit trees and leafy greens on the sidewalks,

A wellness center and a bioswale on every corner

Everyone living 10 minutes from a park

A starry night above the city

Mancaves

“And so, though largely illegible to those who are invested in the integrity and perpetuity of that same system — right smack in the middle of the emblems of its power — a recurring form emerges: the cultivation of the shapeshifting, elusive, lethal, polyglottal, elaborate, sometimes gorgeous improvisations of material-at-hand.”

-Patrick Rosal, *Inside Out, a Poetics of the Last Thing*

“Three New York City transit employees have been busted for quite literally setting up an underground clubhouse for themselves beneath Grand Central Terminal, where they would drink beer, watch TV, and nap on the job... Transit officials say they plan to map the labyrinthine underground rooms connected to the rail system in the future.”

-Sept 25, 2020, Global News

The men in my family, immigrants from Ecuador and the Dominican Republic, were superintendents of buildings in fancy parts of the city: Chelsea, Soho, and the Lower East Side. The women in my family were house keepers in townhouses in even fancier parts: The Upper East Side, The West Village. Somewhere along the way, the ticket to the promised land morphed into cleaning up other people’s messes.

The work that I saw my father do (my mother’s work was away from the home and therefore invisible to me) was obviously very hard and very inconvenient. Sometimes a terrible leak would spring open in the middle of the night, and my dad had to deal with it even if he had work at 8am the next morning. Sometimes a giant rat was trapped in a big plastic trash bin in the courtyard and would jump and jump all night in its desire for freedom, waking everyone up, and the person responsible for dealing with it was my dad. Sometimes there was expired milk in the trash room. The list goes on. You can imagine it.

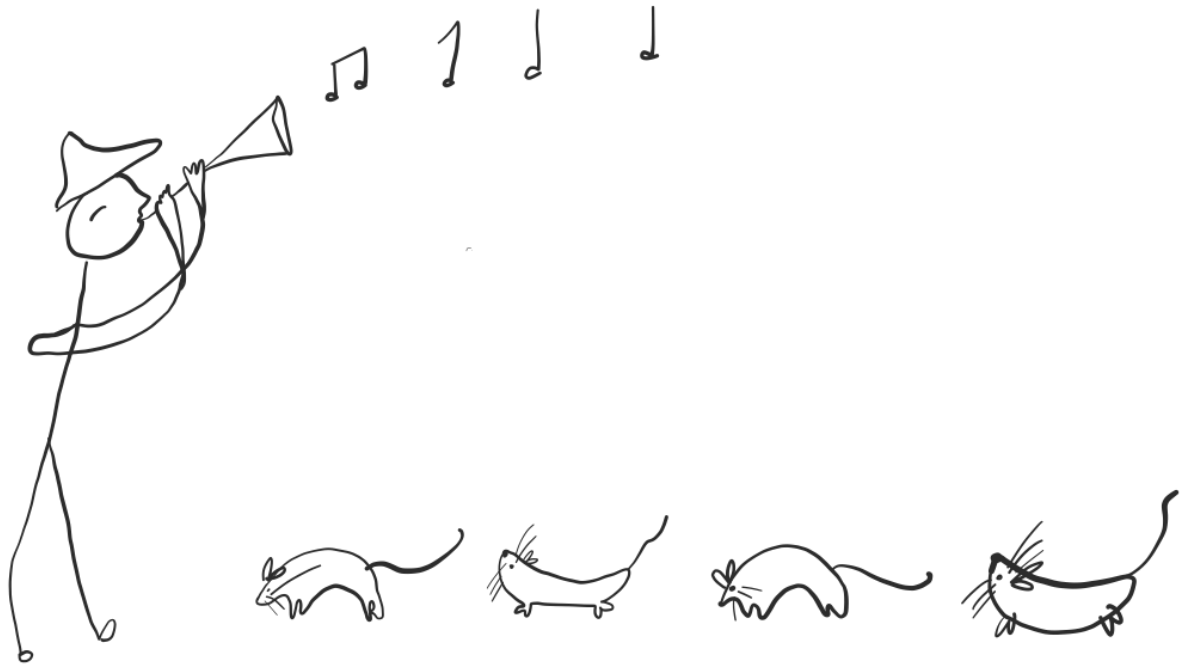
To make life bearable, and to have a space for themselves, my uncles and father fashioned little offices in the basements of the buildings they stewarded. They would arrange their spaces to fit their likeness. For example, my father, who had a degree in literature from Santo Domingo, created his own little study. One wall was covered in books. Under the barred basement windows was a desk. He also had a fridge well-stocked with *Presidentes* and salami and cheese, which he and his fellow workers from other buildings would spend time listening to music, playing cards, laughing, talking politics, and gossiping in the middle of the day.

My uncle, in the Chelsea basement, loved music. He decorated the walls of basement bathroom with the keys of a piano in permanent marker, so that as you peed you could make up a little melody in your mind. His office was full of stringed instruments—guitars, bandolins, charangos. In the corner there was a little TV, where all the men would gather when Ecuador was playing soccer to drink Heinekens in yellow jerseys.

We, their children, grew up straddling two worlds: between *noche buena* parties in the basements of the buildings they cared for, and pledging allegiance *to-the-republic-for-richard-stans*. We understood the gorgeousness and the freedom of their invented spaces, even if they were not visible or even legible to those who did not grow up the way we did.

What a hilarious project, I think, for those in power, to try to *map* these places of rest, like those MTA officials are supposedly attempting to do. How do you map the spaces of

connection and creation, when you have no idea where they are in the first place, and when these spaces live in the spirit?



Keys

That Thursday, after the fourth grade in my elementary school in Chinatown, I walked up Mott Street, past the fish markets, flare jeans soaking up the slushy snow nearly to my calf. I arrived at our metal stoop and dug around in my backpack's front pocket. My un-gloved hand felt around in the detritus—the loose change, the sand, the old receipts, the bent-up straw papers—only to discover that my keys were nowhere to be found.

I walked into the Tibetan jewelry store next door, where Pelgi, the shop owner greeted me with a knowing smile. His store smelled spiced and warm, like incense cones. I eyed the wall of silky red hats lined with shiny, dark black fur. He pulled out the spare set of keys he agreed to hold for me, for when this happened the month before.

It made me feel a little better that the hour between four and five was the hour of lost keys. The tenant from apartment 3B buzzed the doorbell. He was still wearing a pea coat and a blue button down from work.

“I’m locked out, I think your father has a spare key?”

Though my father was still commuting home from work, I knew where the jar of keys lived.

I dragged a step stool to the fridge and climbed it. I returned to the hallway with the massive jar made for preserving the freshness of pasta or cereal, not necessarily keys. I emptied its contents onto the tiled floor and release a shiny waterfall of loose nickel and brass. Of course, there was no system. Not even a label or a keychain.

Was your key an innie or an outie?

How many teeth did it have?

Do you remember if it was bronze or silver?

Is this the shape that unlocks your world?

We worked through the pile like this, and our memories, so full of holes, managed to contain some of the answers.

Places to Play in Manhattan

“You know there’s a legend and it goes like this
 If you kiss the lamppost between 224th street and 225th
 In the Bronx
 When it’s a full moon
 You’ll be granted three wishes”
 -Regina Spektor, The Bronx

Start by walking south through the icy fish markets on Mott Street. Look into the plastic trash bins full of live frogs for sale. If you are feeling raw, put your hand on your heart. Be grateful you have space to move, that you will live to see another day, that, in this life, you are not a frog at a fish market. Jump over the stream of fish water along the curb. Make it to Ten Ren where your friend awaits and buy a large black milk bubble tea. As you chew the tapioca balls, make sure to save as many as you can, you will need them for the game.

Jiggle the front doors of the walk ups as you walk northeast towards Alphabet City and Loisaída. Along the way, use the colorful straw and sweet tapioca as a blowgun. Shoot targets. Ads are best. Ten points for the “n” in the middle of Celino and Barnes. Ten Points for the D in McDonalds. Twenty points for the belly button on the Calvin Klein model in the billboard. Even if you don’t win, be pleased by the hollow high note of the tapioca sent singing through the straw. *Phwip!*

Climb the stairs of the first walk-up with a faulty front door lock. Quickly, quietly, two by two until you are out of breath. Press the cold bar of the roof exit but be careful not to set off the alarm. Inhale the cold air and giggle in delight. Peek at the tiny people walking

below. Shoot the moving targets: the little triangles above the cabs advertising makeup and strip clubs. Think about how your parents call ads and commercials *propaganda*, the word for ads in Spanish. What point of view is being pushed about womanhood and your place in the world, everywhere you look? Nevermind. *Phwip!*

The sky, usually a sliver, is an endless blue expanse full of clouds so puffy and beautiful you could cry. You and your friend run across the rooftops, jumping over the barriers that designate one from the other until it is time to return home.

Brighton Beach

Before grad school, I worked out of a tiny studio apartment crammed full of old newspapers and new books in Brooklyn Heights. There was very little space to walk around in it. One early Spring day, I grabbed a copy of Elif Batuman's "The Idiot" to spend the commute back to my parent's apartment in Midwood. The air outside the office was very different from the air inside. Less dense with dust.

I don't know what happened, but I devoured the book without stopping for air. In the book, Selin and Ivan try, and fail, with language. Everyone was as lost as I felt. I read as far as the Q train would take me, past my stop at Kings Highway, all the way to Brighton Beach that day. When I arrived, something compelled me to get off the train and walk to the beach. It was nearly empty. The sky was the same pink as the book cover. The ocean gleamed silver. The moon was round and full. I sat on the sand, still slightly warm from the late Spring sun.

I saw myself in the last paragraph, and then in all of the beautiful, haggard faces on my commute back home.



The Basement

Things left behind by tenants for a hundred years:

old lamps, mirrors, crystal decanters,

failed paintings, photo albums, vintage leather boots.

Even the hundred-year-old boiler in its clammy room was a portal—

all of those golden levers, the rusted meters,

the little cranks, the whooshing sound of steamed water

circulating six stories away from its beating heart.

Exploring with a little flashlight I came across a hidden room,

almost all rubble and brick, impossibly black.

The closest room to the catacombs of St. Patrick's Old Cathedral,

the same brick too.

I only showed my sister, who, in fear of possession,

begged me to never leave her side, even to go to the bathroom.

The best part was afterward, when we opened up the cellar door

and emerged from the ruins onto sunny Prince Street with a secret.

The manicured masses walked quickly past, with no idea

just how much magic laid beneath their feet.

Years later, the room appears in my dreams, and

what is it trying to tell me? I think of

those holy ghosts across the wall: Pierre Toussaint buried next to Stephen Jumel

and all those bodies washed away in the flood.

**A Love Letter to the Muralist Collective *Janaína*,
my Former Roommates in Valparaíso**

Three powerful women
spray painted murals onto tin walls
in our rusty, borrowed town by the sea.
Here: a humpback whale breaches through flowers,
Here: three nude figures gaze out of an endless window,
Here: a painted poem invites you to enter the world.

I discovered they were witches when
I caught them invoking the elements
on the golden balcony of our homestay,
The wind: hazy with light stuck in its crystals,
The water: inky black and interminable,
The land: on fire,
The fire: raging.

On this Friday the 13th, I write
There is nothing magical about magic.
It is simply having influence over results.
Still, when a woman achieves it, I can't help but feel
like lightning. First the bright pang of euphoria,

then the delayed rumble of exhausted effort.

Meanwhile, in the plazas, I walk past the faces of men,
ready for battle, illuminated like saints.



Valle Del Elqui, Chile 2014

You can usually tell that you are looking at a planet in the sky if it doesn't twinkle. Stars appear to twinkle because they are obstructed by the Earth's atmosphere. Their light and hue gets refracted in the prisms of dust and moisture in the distance between us and them.

Whether the star appears red or blue depends on its temperature—red stars are cooler, blue stars and white stars are hotter and more energetic. In general the red stars are older, the cool colored stars are younger, though I have heard stars have curious life cycles.

The less dust, moisture, and light pollution in the sky as you look into it, the clearer the vision of the lights in the sky. Valle del Elqui Chile, just south of the Atacama Desert, provides these conditions. There is no hope for the skyglow of neighboring cities to get stuck in a moist atmosphere, your gaze can continue up as far as you send it. When we drive up the parched mountains to the observatory in the Valle del Elqui, the night sky is a glistening, colorful liquid. It swirls blue, red, white, and green. Its points of light constantly blink and transfigure. It takes such a long time for our eyes to adjust to see particular stars and not just a flapping sheet of color.

The astronomer leads me to a telescope at the edge of the mountain and has me focus my eyes on one point of light—one star. It takes me a while to find it, the one steady light in the top-left corner of my vision. He focuses his telescope on the point as I fix my gaze on it. Then he calls me over to look.

Through the eyepiece, I see three perfectly formed spiral galaxies, like our own, and one elliptical one. On the left side of the image, there is a trail of white dust, a bruise of light resembling the Milky Way. That the image of one point of light in the sky could contain all of this matter winds me like a swift kick to the gut. But the astronomer is not done. He zooms in on the image one more time, into a part of one of the galaxies. *This is the Jewel Box Star Cluster* he proclaims. The lens reveals a collection of vividly red, green, blue, and white stars. The name is perfect.

I leave Chile as soon as I get used to its odd rhythms and upside-down constellations. As I ride to the airport on the bus, the Andes mountain range flashes its last snow-capped smile. I want to revel in my melancholy, but a strange bus mate is in a chatty mood.

I tell him about my semester at the Universidad de Playa Ancha, all of the days spent watching students throw rocks and Molotov cocktails at the militarized police, how classes got cancelled and I ended up meeting my Spanish professor in her apartment for tea. We talked about books so I could get credit for my time abroad despite the protests. (I don't tell him about her sun-drenched bathroom with the sleeping cat curled up on the toilet, whiskers alight. I also don't tell him about how I thought it was funny that she had prints of Klimt's *The Kiss* and Van Gogh's *Arles Café at Night* flanking her couch, until the rendering of light in each became more and more serious for me.)

He tells me that he is an astronomer here for research but headed back to Germany now. I learn that he was part of the Nobel team who had discovered that the universe is

expanding at an accelerating rate, *not* expanding then contracting as previously believed.

When I ask him how they figured this out, he says it has to do with analyzing the hues of the stars at the edges of the universe. *Red has a wide and slow wavelength; blue and white have tall and fast ones. The farther out you go, the longer the wavelengths become. They turn red.*

The stars will continue to move farther apart and the darkness between each will deepen.

The stars themselves will lose energy and grow dimmer, the energy will snuff out like billions of spent candles. A cold death.



Opt Inside

The plan slips through their fingers all of October. Then a free sunny weekend comes up in the forecast and one of them mentions the almost extinct plan again to the other. They decide to go camping once the work week is over, on the third Saturday in November. They load up the car with what they need: a tent, blankets, food, water, clothing. It takes several trips up to their fourth-floor walk-up to get all of these things between the two of them, but finally, they feel prepared.

On the way to the campsite, the woman notices a pile of firewood and suggests they pull over to buy it in case it is hard to come by firewood near the park. The man drives past it, he says that they probably sell some cheaper wood in the park. When they check in at the ranger station, the man asks about the firewood. They tell him that that private residence they drove by twenty minutes ago is the only place to get wood. They go back. The man selects a bundle of wood from the pile and places five dollars into a tin box.

Forty minutes later and they arrive at the campsite. It is right next to a two-lane highway. As it is getting late, the couple decides to split up the duties. The woman begins setting up the tent, the man begins to gather kindling for the fire. Their chihuahua, who is shivering, follows them around desperately like a captive prisoner. The man wraps the shivering creature in three sweaters and a blanket and asks him to stay still on the picnic table.

The woman is struggling with the tent. The poles are slightly bent and the mallet, to drive the stakes into the cold ground, is missing. The man comes to help her. He notes that the ground beneath the tent is kind of bumpy. He wants to move the tent to the other edge of the campsite, where the land appears to be more even. The woman sees no difference. Ok, you do it, she says, and goes to tend to the fire, which has not started.

As she gathers kindling, she realizes all of the leaves strewn around the perimeter of the campsite are damp. The twigs are damp. The logs they just bought are damp. She goes into the car and grabs some napkins and receipts from the cup holder. She lights them with a long-necked lighter and holds a damp leaf over the small flame. The water from within the leaf steams away, and it slowly begins to dry out. Shit, she says.

The man is kicking the stakes into the ground with his heel. They are made of yellow plastic, and they bend out of shape. Good enough, he says. He joins the woman over the fire. They spend the next forty minutes feeding the languid flame damp material.

It is getting dark, and the woman is getting hungry. She cuts up some vegetables and tosses them messily into foil. She throws the pack into the metal bin that surrounds the fire. It still could not be called a fire, she notes, yet an entire log has steamed into charcoal. There are some embers beneath. Enough to cook with but not enough to be warm.

The woman retreats to the tent. Too cold, she tells the man. I got it babe, go nap with the dog, he says. The woman wraps herself in the blanket in the tent and presses the dog, who

is curled up like a donut, to her belly. The dog stops shivering, and the woman finds a position where she finally stops shivering too—crossed legs, tucked head, fetal position, completely under three blankets.

The man come inside the tent with a barely cooked potato. They eat inside the tent by the light of an iPhone. The man emerges to clean up the campsite and dump a Nalgene of water onto the useless fire. His hands are covered in soot from tending to the fire for hours. The moon is full, and the man stands beneath it for a few breaths, blown away by how bright it is.

The man enters the tent. The woman tells him to close the fly right away because cold air is getting in. The three wrap themselves up like burritos and turn off the iPhone light. The moon shines directly through the tent material like a floodlight.

At four in the morning, the couple admits that they haven't slept at all. I'll turn the car on, the man says. He sleeps in the front seat and lets the woman sleep in the back. I can feel my hands again, the woman says. They sleep until ten in the morning and do not bother making another fire. They drive to a pancake spot and head back into the city as soon as they can.

Ode to the Hammock

I went to take out the trash on a night of a full blue supermoon in New York City. A gorgeous crystal decanter sparkled under the fluorescent light among the discarded magazines and soda cans from the building. I scooped it up and soaked it in soapy water in the sink. I had plans for it.

Later that night, my sister and I went to the roof to sit underneath the light of the full moon and look out over the buildings in the neighborhood. I filled the decanter with filtered water and carried it up the six-story walk-up. It was heavy in my hands, but I balanced it carefully, trying hard not to let it shatter.

We sat together in that quiet night, moon bathing, and charged the water with our intentions. We promised to come back for the decanter at dawn, after it had absorbed the power of both the moon and our desires. We were going to drink the moon water.

In the morning, the decanter was gone. I imagine that someone else went up to the roof in the morning to smoke a cigarette or drink a coffee before work, saw the decanter, and fell in love like I had. I imagine it is being put to good use somewhere, making infused wines and being the star of every dinner party. Maybe they used the water to nourish a plant. Maybe our dreams live on somewhere else.

*

Years later, my sister was working on a report for an environmental justice organization. She spent all her time making maps of the city. She marked certain places in red: places where the heat island effect was the strongest, places with the highest rates of asthma, places that would be the most vulnerable to superstorms, places with the most toxic waste stored, ready to spill during the first flood. These places were always the same in every map.

She invited me to spend the day at a workshop in Harlem, where two powerful grandmothers did the work of recycling the trash in a NYCHA public housing complex with volunteers from their buildings. These grandmothers had been hosting these workshops in the lobbies of their public housing buildings since the 1970s. They have been advocating for the city to properly dispose of the trash in their buildings since then. All of these years later, the situation had not changed. The women were clearly forces of nature. They were also tired.

My sister came to present her work at an environmental justice conference in Philadelphia and stayed in my apartment. She shared a burnout questionnaire that she had gotten at one of the booths with me. I approached the questionnaire as if it were an exam—determined to ace it. Most questions were straightforward, as if they could be on an intake form at a clinic: How many hours a night do you sleep? How often do you exercise?

Then, there was this one: How often do you watch the clouds change shape? (Never, not very often, sometimes, often, always). I began to picture myself as a small girl laying on

a concrete sidewalk in New York City, watching a massive cumulus transform above the red-brick buildings. I laughed at how child-like the question seemed thrown up against the others, but to my delight I was able to fill in the bubble for five on the likert scale as if I were gaining points on a test: often. I owe this luxury to a recent move from New York City to Philadelphia, where I installed a camping hammock on my deck. With the arrival of summer, I lie on it often. It is from this hammock that I watch the clouds change shape in the sky above me, which, according to this self-care evaluation, is very good for my well-being.

*

Pamela and I grew up with hammocks, at least for part of the time. They were all over the place when I would visit my parent's respective countries of the Dominican Republic and Ecuador. My parents like to tell me about the introduction of the hammock to America. According to them, was introduced by the Spanish colonizers. They laugh at the absurdity of this invention, and call it "lazy."

Something about the word lazy stings. Something in this retelling feels inaccurate to me. People who came to impose work on a populace just don't seem capable of building an object of leisure, especially one that works so well with the natural environment.

So I begin digging into this claim, and find that the hammock was developed by the pre-Colombian inhabitants of the Americas. Original hammocks were slung between trees to lift sleeping bodies above the ground, away from snakes, insects, and other animals. The word hammock comes from the Taíno and Awarak word hamaka. Both populations are native to Hispaniola, and both suffered serious losses to the Spanish colonizers.

*

I still remember the giant, colorful cloth hammock from Otavalo that my grandmother kept in her garden, where five cousins and a puppy would pile on and swing all at once. I remember the more rustic hammocks constructed of some sort of net that hung beneath my uncle's house on stilts in the tiny town of Olmedo. As far back as they tell me, my family were campesinos, agricultural people who worked the land. When the equatorial days turned scorching, the workers would eat lunch and wait out the sun by swaying in these hammocks.

They were my favorite places to rest, face full of hand-picked papaya, with chickens scratching at the mud beneath me.

I remember the hammocks in the Dominican Republic, even in the capital where everyone had gates around their balconies like they were living in bird cages. There were hammocks in these bird cages. There were hammocks in the bedrooms. What I remember about my summers in New York is that they were hammock-less. I would try to get the same effect by perching on a couch near a window, or bent legged and barefoot on a fire-

escape holding a book. Always wishing to be rocked in the breeze, peaceful in the real thing.

*

While in Cuba on a school trip, I was surprised to learn that Cuba's first national hero was a Dominican. His name was Hatuey, and he was a Cacique, or leader, of the Taíno people in Hispaniola. The colonizers had arrived in Hispaniola first, and when Hatuey witnessed what the colonizers had done to the people on his island, he travelled to Cuba (then called Cubanacán) to warn the others of the dangers they would soon face when the colonizers landed on their shores.

With a basket of gold and jewels in his hand, Hatuey proclaimed "this is the God the Spaniards worship. For these, they fight and kill." Unfortunately, the uprising Hatuey led was no match for the colonizers. When he was eventually burned at the stake, a priest asked if Hatuey would accept Jesus and go to Heaven. Hatuey asked the priest if the Spaniards went to heaven.

When the priest said yes, Hatuey, the badass, said he would rather go to hell. The colonizers not only took their land, gold, culture, and souls. The colonizers took the hammocks.

*

I wish I knew more about my history. It comes to me in fragments, bits and pieces, here and there. I barely know about my grandparents, their last names. Migration and the school system have made these things difficult. I tell this to my sister as we sway on the camping hammock on my deck. It is strong enough to hold both of us plus the books flopped on our bellies, their spines facing the summer sky. There is a picture of us as teens in the same pose in the hammock in my grandmother's garden—in the photo my sister is reading *Love in the Time of Cholera*, and I am reading *This is How You Lose Her*, angry about the patriarchy. Today, my sister is distracted.

“Do the clouds always move this quickly?” She asks me, inspired by her wellness questionnaire to look up at the clouds. I realize she is a person who doesn't look up at the sky much. Five hundred years after the colonizers came to the Americas looking to accumulate wealth, their reverence of it never ended. Their quest for profit continued at all costs, at the expense of both humans and the planet. Trying to mitigate the harm is difficult work, work that requires “wellness questionnaires” to measure burn out.

For now, we are watching the clouds change shape. We are in a hammock.



Marina

I am finding a new home
at the Delaware River's Mouth.
Specks of light on its surface
swirl into shapes of familiar nations.
Some like the ones from my parents, before.
Some like the ones I live in now (still, reshaping).

I wasn't kidding when I told you
being landlocked makes me antsy.
Mountains bruise my eyes with beauty
yet all I know are port cities,
their limitless farewells,
(their contact).

Avarice may have chopped down my family tree
but I've been sorting through the pieces
and finding the name "Marina" stacked
like a totem on both sides.

A trail of Marinas.
protectresses of the sea

who savored that enchanting spot
where steady air melts to glittery deep
and day flows seamlessly to night.

La quema del año viejo//The burning of the old year



A man, in his thirties, stands on a road in a tight black dress sparkling with what looks like glitter in the fabric. His knees, lightened and parched by the dust kicked up by cars in the road, punctuate his furry legs. He is wearing lipstick, it is dark black and a bit overlined, and his borrowed, stuffed purple bra peeks out of the top of the shiny dress. In his unevenly manicured hands, he holds the end of a rope, which is pulled tightly across the road, the other end held in place by boys in their early adolescence.

They block my path with the rope, and the man in the dress speaks for the group:

Un par de dolaritos para mi esposo, el año nuevo, quien murió recién?//A few little dollars for my husband, the old year, who recently died?

I reach into my own dress pocket and pull out the dollar I was about to spend on a new graph notebook from my tía Diana's bodega. I hand it over to the man-turned-glamorous-widow, who blows me a kiss. The effect that this kiss has on me is that it rips open my life. In the space ripped open, there is a mystery.



It's the summer after my first year at college, and all summer long I feel as though I am withering under the expectation of my gender in this little town in Ecuador. I am at constant war with my body hair, attempting to keep my legs shaved and shown, but not too much. To be polite to the men who creep me out, but not too much. To have fun, but not too much.

My mother, who was born and raised here through adulthood, insisted all my childhood that my sister and I remain virgins until marriage. *Diosito sees everything*, she warned. At mass, the lesson was reinforced by Father Thomas at the pulpit.

Step out of line and you know what happens? Hellfire.



It's not that back in my liberal arts college in Maine we were exactly *libertines* or anything. Even if I didn't always see it clearly back then, the culture was, frankly, misogynist. It was common knowledge that the senior boys who lived in the Rugby house only allowed underclassmen girls into parties and served them heavily spiked "crack

juice”. And this is just one example. The implied specter of campus rape loomed large in our collective imaginations.

And though we were, on the surface, not punished with the threat of hellfire for hooking up with one another without being eternally committed, we still could not do it without layers and layers of distancing. True liberty and connection in sex were kept at arm’s reach—morphed into a giggly and distant retelling over brunch, blunted under too much alcohol, hidden away under the cover of night. Yet, I think we were still earnestly trying, in our ways, to be free.

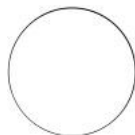


According to Amaya Quereza in her article *Andean Cosmovision and Global Governance*, “In Andean cosmovision, there is no difference between what is rational and what is emotional or spiritual. Reality can be known through rational cognitive processes but also with the help of rituals. There is no separation between observer and observed. Knowledge is also affective, bodily and mystic: its origin lies in experience, memory and suffering.”

There is a ritual I do every year that I learned from my older cousins from Andean Ecuador. They were visiting New York City that year, and we huddled together,

protecting the lighter's little flame from the icy winter air, and guided the intention of its heat toward the things we desperately wanted to burn.

I have adapted it for my own needs below—



Ritual of release: To be performed at the end of a cycle. A full moon, for example. Or the end of a year. Also, the end of the harvest season when the air begins to feel cool on your face. The end of a relationship. In the evening before bed. At the end of an inhale.

1. Reflect on what you are able to release, what no longer serves.
2. Write it down. Sit with it. Say goodbye.
3. Burn the page. Burn whatever you want.

Note-Adding steps to the ritual increases both your focus and the power of the ritual. Feel free to add music. Feel free to add smells. Feel free to dance—circular movements are preferable.



What about the ritual of the men on the street, encouraged to dress as women for the day? These were the same men who insisted on being served first and not clearing their plates. What was happening? What was I seeing?

In order to remember the viuda who blew me a kiss all of those years ago, I watch a Youtube video of a group of Ecuadorian men in Quito preparing to go out for the day dressed as widows. The women in their lives—their friends, girlfriends, and cousins—lent them clothes and offered to do their makeup. Though women still seem to be the butt of the joke—the men exaggerated our features and our mannerisms—there was something irresistible about their joy. They danced on police cars. They jumped through the windows of public busses and gave passengers lap dances. They did all of the things a “bad” woman would not be allowed to do under the threat of violence or hell. Yet somehow, it all felt necessary.

I recently sat in on an author talk with Jessica Hagedorn, where she spoke a little about the misogynistic violence that often accompanies authoritarian regimes. She was speaking directly about Marcos in the Philippines but mentioned Trujillo in the Dominican Republic as an example, the regime that guided my father through the treacherous realm where boys become men. I think of the similarly intense machismo of Ecuador.

I have seen how fatal this machismo can be, yet Hagedorn insists that the Philippines is actually a matriarchal society. *The women, they raise the kids, they are the center of the*

*families, they are deeply respected. Always be suspicious of the macho umbrella, she tells me, there is no way they can perform *that* way, all the time. There's gotta be something else going on.*

According to Gloria Minango Narvaez in her article about las viudas, “During carnival, one lives between reality and play; laws and prohibitions are cancelled; hierarchies and social inequalities are subverted.¹” This is true in Caribbean carnivals and carnival in Ecuador, which come before the sobriety of lent and allow people to become kings and queens for the day.

If we think of the año viejo celebrations as a kind of carnival, which hierarchies are being subverted? If it were the gender hierarchy, wouldn't the women become powerful men for the day? But what does it mean if in Ecuador the men, who supposedly hold the power, are subverting the hierarchy? What is the cage they wish to escape?

At the time of this writing, Donald Trump is the most popular prefabricated effigy to burn. The effigies are normally reviled politicians, or those who hold power. The whole thing feels like necessary catharsis. At midnight, the entire country goes up in flames. The next morning it begins anew. People flock to the ocean, plunge in, and are reborn.

¹ My translation from: “En el carnaval se vive entre la realidad y el juego; se cancelan todas las leyes y prohibiciones; se suprimen las jerarquías y las desigualdades sociales.”



With rebirths, come rituals of intention.

Ritual of intention:

To be done at the beginning of the New Year, the follicular stage of the menstrual cycle, at the end of an inhale, the start of Spring.

1. Bathe. Extra points if you bathe in the rain, the ocean, or a river.
2. Engage in any practice that helps you feel centered and connected.
3. Affirm your intentions. Speak from the heart.



My deepest desire is to open the cage of masculinity that holds the men in my family hostage. Though I do not know what it is like to relinquish the cage, I do know the pain of masking my soft places with alcohol, not being able to access my emotions wholly, and judging my own depth of feeling. I know what it's like to be expected to behave a certain way, simply because of the way you were born. I want those captured by toxic masculinity to dissolve their boundaries, to not be as concerned with respect or domination. To live each day quemando el año viejo.



Philadelphia Navy Yard

Shipping container mountains
reshuffled by the gantry crane's massive arms
Retired warships, building-sized,
sleep in a tidy row by the old army barracks
Sun-bleached paint
faded to pastel pinks and baby blues—
the palette of a baby shower,
or a smoggy horizon at dawn.
The water, dense with mud, sludge, mussels,
captures the sun in its little diamond peaks.
What histories am I seeing? What histories am I missing?

In the distance, a family of scraggly foxes studies me intently.
They stand in the space between the office buildings,
drive-in movies, and that old factory now inhabited by trees—
branches pushing through dirty windows toward the sky.

Gather Your Ghosts

I am seated at the table with my mother and her brother, ready to be introduced to their ghosts, who, I suppose, are also my ghosts.

Deeper in the apartment, my father, who agreed to give us some space, has turned on that El Gran Combo Puertorriqueño song I love. He is shifting from foot to foot, one hand on his belly over his thin white shirt and one in the air, the top of his spine hunched forward, and his eyes squinted small by his smile--

Tu me tienes temblando de noche y de día

Tu me hiciste, brujería...

I have so many questions, and don't know where to begin. I want to know the story of why we are all sitting, together, above the Domino Market 2 in Brooklyn, and why the family walks around hunched, nervous, and cold in this borrowed land like we've been cursed for generations. I just want to know, simply, how the fuck we got here.

The other day, while gathering crumbs, I made the mistake of rereading the copy of Bartolome de Las Casas *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* I had in my apartment. Everywhere that my ancestry DNA told me my ghosts had been, there they were, suffering at the hands of the colonizers: the Awarak, the Taino and the people of the Gulf of Guayaquil, in the Yucatan and in the Amazon. There were my ghosts, both the oppressors and the oppressed. It was a cursed story, and I was drawn to it like a moth

to a flame. So I am trying to gather my ghosts, right here, straight from the horse's mouth, at the table, above the Domino Market 2.

I press record and my uncle Ernesto begins, the story emerging from his brand-new teeth.

"There were about four major families who owned the land, and the rest of us were very poor, our lives revolved around those families. My job, when I was a young boy, before joining the army, was to carry the sick eight hours from the town to the city. We used a hammock to transport them. Sometimes we returned with their bodies. We were paid two or three sucres a day for our labor."

My mother's voice, bursting with its own information, interjects--

"Tell her about the house. Ok, I'll do it. We grew up on the bank of the river. Our father, who only went to school through the second grade, built our house out of stilts. If the rainy season was bad, the house would wash away, and we had to stay with cousins a little farther inland."

"Did you tell her about our grandfather yet?"

"No, I don't know the story."

Tu me hiciste brujería

Brrrrr, Demonio!

"He was the one who came from Almeria, Spain."

"Why did he come to Olmedo? And alone? That doesn't make any sense."

“I don’t know, I actually never met him, but our father told me all about him. His name was Andres Sanchez-Lopez. He had been a nephew of one of the landowning families here, and decided to join to try to make his fortune. And you know what, he was actually successful.”

“How did he make his money? Wait, no, why did he come to Olmedo?”

My uncle pauses, smiles, and swirls milk into his Café Bustelo with the chewed off end of a rosquita. His face is like, buckle up, I have a story and I’m about to take my time. He starts off slow, his voice grave, gathering momentum and velocity while speaking very steady, very serious, with less and less prompting from me, until I am just nodding, until I am no longer nodding, until he has lifted off, until he has taken flight.

“At the time, a lot of foreigners were coming to Ecuador to see how they could make money. His ancestors had travelled from Almeria to the coast of Ecuador to make their fortune, yet Andres Lopez-Sanchez, which was our grandfather, had broken off and snaked his way up the Puca River on a canoe into the small town of Olmedo. During his travels, he looked at the abundance of nature and life all around him and was simultaneously struck by its beauty and desperate to make it useful for a profit, to validate to his family the lunacy of such a trip.

The journey had been unexpectedly difficult. He had decided to travel before the rainy season for fear of capsizing, and because of this the river ran dry in many different areas, forcing Andres to portage his boat and all of his provisions over several silty canals. At

the bottom of the riverbanks he found many treasures—pottery shards, bracelets, the skeletons of lengthy crocodiles, even old gold coins.

A hard, round seed called Tagua fell out of the trees in such furious abundance and speed that Andres had to fasten a piece of wood to his head as a helmet. Out of curiosity and boredom, he took a pocketknife to a seed and drank the milky substance that drained out of it. When he was still alive and well hours later, Andres decided the substance was both energy-producing, and edible.

He was astounded by the toughness of the seed, yet amazed at how easily it could be carved under the pressure of his knife. Andres collected sacks full of seed, and when the river was calm, he passed time aboard his boat by carving them into sturdy and opalescent figurines of the sights he had passed—river dolphins, pocket monkeys, sloths, adobe houses, orchids, stick bugs.

Upon reaching Olmedo, Andres was so weary and relieved to be able to pay for lodging he knew he would stay for as long as he needed. He settled in and hired local women to help him carve and process the seed from its raw form into buttons. The material looked so much like ivory, the community began referring to it as “vegetal ivory.”

The Navarro family, another landowning family in the region, took note of this enterprising newcomer and invited him to a dinner at their home. As their servants refreshed their glasses, they hatched a plan to ship the ivory buttons to Europe, in places

where animal ivory was falling out of favor because of excessive poaching. This new form of vegetal ivory became hugely popular.

By the time the rainy season's interminable downpour sent everyone inside and flooded the riverbanks, both Andres's life and his pocket were in bloom. He had invited one of his young employees, an inventive button maker named Aurelia, whose artistic vision fascinated Andrés, in to live with him. She had been born on the outskirts of the town, and though their union was not legal under the eyes of God, Andres promised they would solve that issue when the rain stopped.

They constructed a house with a large central courtyard around one single banyan tree, so as not to disturb the songbird's roost, as Aurelia suggested. They made love in each of the hammocks that lined the balcony facing the courtyard, accompanied by the shrieks of the bright green parrots. Aurelia gave birth to three sons in rapid succession, the first identical to his father in temperament and looks. They named him Andrés.

The first Andrés was consumed by a happiness he had never thought possible. He rose to prominence in the town and helped fund all of its parties and parades in the town square. While his world grew, Aurelia's shrank. She became more and more responsible for their business and domestic affairs. She buckled under the weight of all of her responsibilities and felt as if, in his latest incarnation, all her husband wanted was to indulge and celebrate things that had, and would, never come to be.

One day, Andrés entered the general store to look for cases of imported beer. He had already been drinking and lit his cigarette near a barrel of gunpowder. Andrés immediately caught on fire. His clothes burnt off, along with much of his skin. He died three days later, on a canoe on its way to a hospital in the city, leaving Aurelia, a seven-year-old Andres, and his two younger brothers behind, without access to his estate, because Aurelia and Andres had never married.”

Gather Your Ghosts 2

“No way, he died like *that*?”

“Si mija, that’s what they told me.”

“Ok, so what about your dad?”

“So, he was kind of a trickster. He worked as a cane cutter, but weasled his way into an office job as a secretary. His job was to update an old book, that had the names of everyone in the town in it. Dead and alive.”

A hundred-year-old book with four hundred and seventy-three pages laid open before Andres. Though it took up the whole desk, about half of its pages remained empty. Its weight allowed the book to sit flat at its margin, which was several feet long. To reach the top of each page with his pen, Andres had to stand up and lean over the desk, with a sheet of onion paper placed over the text under his left palm for support.

The book was made up of three repeating columns: name, birth, and death. The job Nicolás offered Andres was a simple one, the book needed to be updated with a precise and florid pen. On a separate desk, piles of newspaper clippings, birth certificates, obituaries, and notes written on the backs of napkins by the town’s doctor Griselio served as Andres’s source materials.

From his perch in front of the massive painted shutters that overlooked the plaza, Andres took the opportunity to scan his life up until then, and decided that this was a moment that he would look on fondly in the future. He savored a soft breeze through the leaves of

the ceiba trees, and exhaled smoke from his cigarette toward the open window. In his other hand, he flicked India ink off of the tip of an elegant ivory pen.

The young man couldn't help but revel in the elegance and ease of his new post. Since the age of seven, Andres had been scraping together all sorts of employment, but never could he have imagined himself as a man in a button-down shirt, albeit, a borrowed one, in such a stately office.

He admired the baroque designs around the molding and the way the eggshell blue walls met each other so precisely in the corners. He felt an immense sense of relief. Somehow, he had found his way into yet another job, this time in one of the town's most important buildings with a regular schedule and salary. All of this despite not having completed the third grade, a source of pride when among the macheteros and forest clearers, morphed suddenly into a secret source of shame.

He flipped to the page with his father's name and death date. Instead of "birth" the column said *in. Esp. 1904* and his death date, *1927*. It was the only significant death he could think of in his own life. He traced his mother's dates next: *b. 1888*, and his own, *1920*. He looked at that last column, a small, empty rectangular block.

His first thought upon seeing the three columns meant to represent his life as it would be inscribed in the history of the town, was that as the keeper of such a book, he should be allowed to decide what date went there. As he spent the next few hours carefully reading

the materials provided by the town's officials and blindly entering death dates, his vision began to change. His eyes became a simple camera viewing the lives of others--the old swept away by tuberculosis, cancers, malaria, tetanus, the farmers in accidents and strikes, the women in childbirth and domestic disputes, young men shot dead by celebratory bullets released into the sky that came barreling back to earth.

As he flipped back and forth in the book, he was filled by the dark compulsion to be able to complete the work somehow, to be the person who filled in every last page. He wished for his life to stretch forward and backwards with the rows of the book. And yet, he recognized that in his own lifetime he would fill maybe just a page of it. There would only be so many births and deaths in this tiny town in the next fifty years.

He thought of his own life as broken in two: the time before his father's death and the time after, how each piece was so distinct that it felt like it hadn't been the same life at all. Andres, who was not one to be silent, found time to trace the shape of his own thoughts against the details of the lives of other people, and went deeper and deeper into himself, until a knock at the door catapulted him out of his trance.

"You are needed at the Navarro house, bring your notebook. You are to record all of the details to write up a full report," commanded another office worker.

Nothing could have prepared Andres for what came next. He entered the Navarro house, where he found Dr. Griselio and an inconsolable Catalina, cradling Esteban's little body.

Luz, the child's nanny, was red faced and rubbing Catalina's back slowly, speechless. The boy had passed away.

Andres sat on the ground in front of Catalina and put his hands on hers, which were gripping the small boy's clothes tightly. He felt her grip soften. Carefully, he spoke.

"I am so sorry, Doña Catalina, so deeply sorry," and after a pause, "If you want, I can come by tomorrow and help you and your husband make arrangements for the boy."

Catalina, still wailing, did not answer him, so he patted her hands and turned to Griselio.

"Doctor Griselio, was there anyone here who I can talk to? For the report?"

The old doctor shrugged his shoulders, "I just got here myself. I was responding to their call."

"I was here," said a voice from the kitchen. It was Pilar, who was holding a mug of wild peppermint tea in her hands and had a solemn look in her eyes. Unlike the other women, she hadn't been crying, but as Andres moved towards her, he could feel the grief emanating off of her.

Andres sat at the counter and opened up his little notebook. He extended his hand to shake Pilar's. He realized that he had never met her before, but wondered if she was one of the daughters of the family who lived on the outskirts of town. She certainly had the

look of a farm girl, and Andres wondered if he had worked with her father at any point. He didn't know how formal he should be in his new role. He didn't want to scare the girl, but he decided to lean into the role of the objective investigator. He also hoped, in his own way, to lift her sadness.

“Your name?”

“Pilar Sandoval.”

“Age?”

“Seventeen.”

“Can you give me the details of exactly what happened?”

“I was in here, preparing dinner for the family. Esteban...he had been very sick, for several months. He had trouble breathing. The doctor came by each week to treat him, but he wasn't getting any better. He was very playful though, always running around. We all loved him, he was the joy of the house. Today, at about two in the afternoon, he had been chasing Bruno, the family dog, and I heard him from in here. Then I heard Bruno barking, and I couldn't hear Esteban at all. So I ran outside and saw him lying on the ground. I picked him up. I brought him in here and shouted for Luz, who called Dr. Griselio. He was gasping for air, which he did from time to time, it always got better in the past, but this time, his color was all wrong...”

Andres, with his elegant handwriting, was only able to take down three words:
2pm, gasp, and air.

*

“So Pilar is abuelita, your mother.”

“Correct,” tío Ernesto replied, taking a slow sip of coffee.

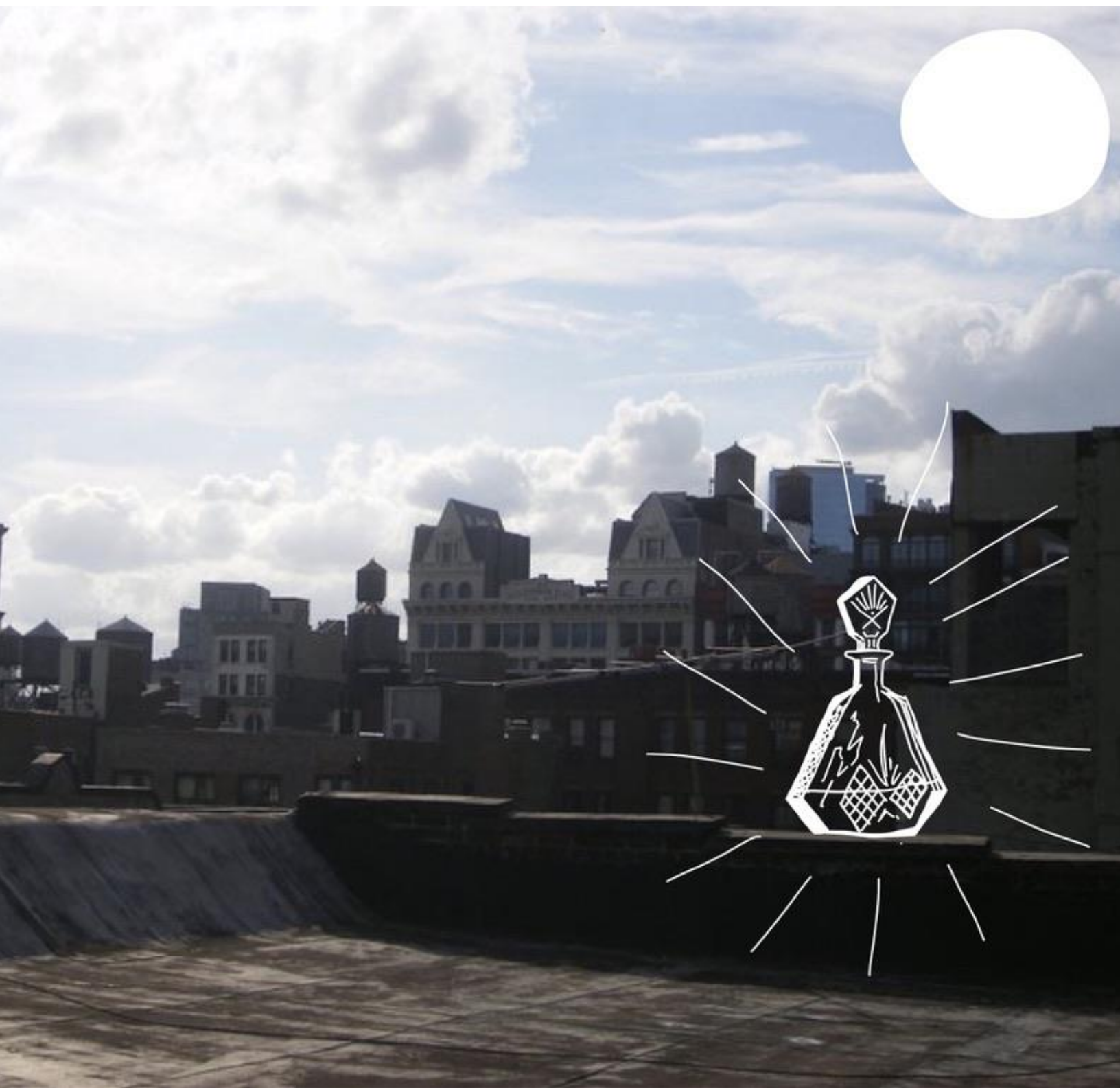
“I imagine Andres tried to win her over after that?”

“He was terrible.”

Suddenly, the kitchen table where we were gathered smelled like peppermint tea.

Nobody mentioned it.

“Mami was a healer,” my mother joined in, “she knew the plants you needed for everything. Remember when you had that terrible cough? And none of the doctors could figure out what to do about it? Well, she told me what to give you. It was stuff we had in the kitchen. It worked.”



Gather Your Ghosts 3

“I feel like she’s here with us,” my father said. Which is when the table became a plaza, the gathering over coffee became a memory.

At only nine am, the town was already scorching and bleached by sun. The family began their short walk through town to the church. Pilar and Luz lagged behind the Navarro family, who walked before them two by two. Catalina, a vision in a silk, white button-down dress with a rounded collar walked in front, holding Don Navarro’s linen-jacket covered arm. Behind them walked their older children, Jaqueline and Cristobal, children from Nicolás’s previous marriage, just slightly younger than Pilar.

Luz held little Esteban’s hand. It seemed like his throat’s asthmatic rattles had ceased for now. His eyes still looked tired, but he moved his body with the unbounded agitation of a small child his age who had more than enough energy to burn.

Pilar, who still felt like an outsider to town, was attentive to its rhythms and changes every time she walked through its plaza. To her, Olmedo seemed to be a small town that radiated out of a central plaza, like an explosion. The most important buildings were consciously arranged around the verdant square. The church was the largest building in town by far, with its gold-plated cross soaring high above the banyan trees. It was constructed of solid granite and had twenty-seven immense stained-glass windows along its front and sides.

On the opposite side of the church was the municipal building. It was a two-story building with a large balcony that created a pleasant, shady overhang. The building was made of a mix of handsome plaster and concrete, with French-style molding framing each

window. It had a fresh coat of robin's egg blue paint, and the moldings and other decorations were painted a tasteful white. Pilar loved this building, which, to her, looked like a quinceañera's birthday cake. This is where Nicolás Navarro, Catalina's husband, worked.

The Saloon was the next best maintained building, though it was tucked slightly away from the central plaza. It had a roof and overhang made of red shingles and was two stories high. The town had carved out ample space in front of the Saloon where shady jacarandas grew, leaving many shady spots for the Tavern's patrons to park their horses out front as they sipped on cold, imported beers.

On the final edge of the plaza was a schoolhouse, made in a traditional colonial style of hardened dry mud on a thatched cane frame. Its painted white plaster exterior was beginning to chip at the corners, revealing the wooden bones underneath. As she walked to church with the Navarro family, Pilar recalled piling onto her family's mare, Rochi, to trot into town with her older siblings. Her family lived at the furthest reaches of the explosion of town in a house on stilts made out of cane, overlooking a crystalline river. The journey to school took just under two hours. By the time she was ten, her parents decided it was no longer worth it to continue sending her. They needed Rochi to help till the soil.

While the rest of the family sat toward the front of the congregation under a stained-glass window of a Madonna and child, Luz and Pilar sat in the back of the church, in case Esteban fell into another fit of coughs and they had to step outside for water, or worse, medical help. In reality, Pilar was happy to sit near the church's massive wooden egress doors because she was ashamed that she hadn't found the time to wash

her dress. The dress's fabric felt too heavy with sweat. She longed for the starchy feeling of clothes dried in the sun. Stiff backed and reverent looking in her pew, Pilar could only think of peeling her dress off and sinking into the warm waters of the river that snaked around the town and toward her family's home.

"Are you not going to get up for communion?" Luz asked Pilar in a tight-lipped whisper.

"I don't want father to see me in this dirty dress. And don't look at me like that, it's not that I've sinned!" Pilar tilted her head toward Esteban, suggesting she could look after him while Luz went up to receive her communion wafer.

"La Santa Pilar," Luz laughed playfully, "you will have to fill me in on what you have done later."

As Luz slithered out of the pew to receive the communion wafer, Pilar tuned into the gentle whisper in Esteban's throat. She clasped her hands together and prayed for his recovery.

After church, Pilar was able to go out into the woods to have her break. She walked across the bridge that connected the center of the town, which was really just the plaza and about twenty homes, to the countryside. She walked along the familiar tobacco farms, coffee bushes, and cacao trees that were irrigated with the water from the river. She picked a particularly ripe papaya growing from a narrow tree on the side of the road that she would have for lunch, with a piece of bread and cheese she had wrapped in the cloth of an old sugar bag.

Along the way, Pilar scanned the earth for herbs that she could use for an oxymel for Esteban's cough. Though the Navarro family had hired a doctor to come by and see Esteban monthly, Pilar was convinced that this standing appointment wasn't helping much. In secret, because she knew Doña Catalina rejected the idea, she prepared special teas and remedies for Esteban, which she and Luz drank alongside him in the evenings. She knew there was only so much that these remedies could achieve, but she noted that they did improve the quality of his breathing and the redness of his throat.

This particular recipe was for a remedy she had learned from her own mother, that worked both as a preventative from colds and as a cough suppressant. So far from the nearest doctor, illnesses could easily turn deadly in the hills, but her mother did a good job of keeping all of her children healthy. The herbs with the strongest smells were usually best for oxymels, as they had the best antimicrobial properties.

Pilar had to place her fruit prize gently on the ground to crouch on the earth, carefully removing certain leaves, making sure to pull them from different nodes on the plant's stem so as to leave less of an impact on the plant, as she had been taught. She ran the fragrant leaves between her fingers and underneath her nose, nodding occasionally with pleasure when she found the ones she was looking for. In her hands, she kept a stack of the leaves, and when she found enough to fill her handkerchief, she rolled them into a bundle and placed them in her pocket.

Finally, Pilar reached her favorite spot at the edge of the river. She loved it because if she swam out far enough, there was a deep hole she could dive into. In this space, her body was free from the dragging will of the fast-moving current.

The branch of a wide mango tree reached nearly across the river. She kept a stash of soapweed yucca perched on the joint between this branch and the tree's trunk to wash her body with. It had remained there, undisturbed since her last visit.

Pilar could have used the shower in the Navarro home, which had both hot and cold running water, but she much preferred coming to this spot when she had the time. It had been her favorite since she was a child, and at seventeen, she sometimes wished she still was one. She placed the papaya, her bundle of gathered herbs, and her lunch on a patch of dry, silty sand at the edge of the river. She waded in, dress and all. Once submerged, she was able to pull the dress off, over her head and wash it in the river. She then hung the dress up to dry on the mango tree's low branch.

It was noon by now, and the sun was so hot that the dress would be dry in minutes. Meanwhile Pilar let the current drag her along the river. She made sure that she remained submerged in the water up to her shoulders. Though no one had come by in all the years she had been coming to this spot, she was horrified at the thought of being seen, replaying her mother's warnings about the dangers of indecency.

In the evening, after the completion of the staggering array of chores strewn about the Navarro house, Pilar sat for a chamomile tea in the front room. The crickets screeched their desperate love songs in the night. Esteban, still pale as a ghost, sat on the couch in the front room, holding Luz's hand. The town's doctor, Griselio, had paid a visit while Pilar was taking her break by the river. The boy now had an official diagnosis—asthma—and the doctor suggested increasing his house visits to administer treatment each week.

“I refuse to sleep,” said the boy, who insisted that it was in fact several tiny crickets that had entered his chest through his throat, and they were rubbing their spiky legs against his bronchi. Inconsolable, Luz decided to stay up with him.

In the kitchen, Pilar began unraveling the leaves in her handkerchief in preparation for the oxymel. She submerged the bruised leaves into a jar of honey, onion, and chopped up garlic, then sealed it tight. She boiled a tea of boldo and chamomile for him to drink, after making him swallow a large tablespoon of honey.

Sipping on the boldo tea before a small fire in the evening made the night feel suddenly intimate. During the day, Pilar and Luz buzzed around the house, exhausting their feet and minds. In the evening, they felt their true, buried selves unspool under the release of pressure from their labor. Their relaxation even affected Esteban, who fell asleep soundly between the two.

Trazodone Dreams

Below is a dream recorded on September 5th, 2020.

I was standing beneath an immense and very old school building. From below, I could see that the building had a jagged, black crack that traveled deep into its reddish sandstone facade. The top layers of the building were crumbling. Pieces of the sandstone were falling out in jagged chunks. I wasn't the only person watching. The parking lot where I stood below the building was packed with panicked people.

A woman with a tight curly haircut sought shelter beneath a dense row of bushes. A couple ran over a slanted barrier that led to the roof of another building. One person was holding a child in their arms. That person was nearly hit by a large flake of the reddish stone. I followed the couple up the barrier. There were many other people on it, and we looked like ants from above.

From above. Donald Trump poked his head out of a very high window in the crumbling building to say: "don't worry, everything is fine, this is the strongest building the world has ever seen." His hair was messy and he had some ash on his face. At this moment the building collapsed entirely. Smoke billowed out of the place where it once stood. We were all running now, dispersing toward other structures. I followed a group that shimmied across the outside of a bridge, over a wide river, to get away.

I fell off of the bridge and into the water. I swam across the wide river. The current was strong and I could see myself from above, a little head bobbing along the spiky surface of the water. I climbed up over a little beach, then a fence, then past the highway. The city was on the other side, and two young men I recognized from the parking lot were there as well.

I climbed up a ramp to join them, but bullets rained down on us from above. We ran past the police toward the city. The crowd wandered back into the city where we wandered among the shopping malls and new developments. We felt we would be safe, as long as we stayed there, as long as we didn't mention what we had seen.

Valpo Memory Triggered in Philly

During the months of the protests, the University Building was an empty husk full of street dogs. One day the students pulled the desks out of classrooms and barricaded the front entrance with them, with a sign that said CHICOS, SCHOOL IS IN THE STREETS TODAY. There was a warm flame blazing in a metal trash bin. Despite these barricades, the History of Social Movements professor insisted on hosting class inside the building.

Here, let the streets be your teacher, the professor told us. He sat on the desk in the front of the room with his ankles crossed and a bandana tied around his neck. He had rips in his jeans. *Let the streets be the stage and,* with a flourish of his hands he added, *let your actions be a performance for the state.*

I had to go back to the United States in a few weeks and would need some sort of assessment for my college. *What is our final project?* I asked. *Go,* he said, *perform for the state.*

On the day of my performance, I wore olive green pants and a black tank top. I wore combat boots with thick rigid soles. I felt incredibly powerful as I stomped around my room. I tied a floral bandanna around my mouth to protect me from tear gas. A classmate told me to bring a lemon, which would help with the stinging. I met up with a couple of friends from my class on the corner of my street, and then we prepared the descent down the hill towards the center of the city.

The city itself was shaped like an amphitheater, it rose up on hills. Everyone had a view of the stage, which was the ocean. What a gorgeous star the ocean was—gleaming, blue, dramatic. The city was electric. All of its youth descended from the hills to demonstrate their unified power. Even the dogs were barking, ready for change.

The state, I should have realized, was also prepared. I guess it is time now to remember the tear gas. Or the guanacos--which were these massive, armored tanks that spat out pressured water like their animal namesakes. Or falling to the ground and tearing my favorite olive-green pants at the knee. Or seeing all of my classmates separated, knocked down, and dispersed as if they were dying embers of a once great fire. Or being trapped in front of a line of militarized police while wearing a screen-printed denim jacket with an image of a girl throwing a molotov cocktail at the police that a friend had painted on. Or walking several miles through the labyrinth of barricaded city blocks to finally make it onto a crowded city bus back up the hill, alone, where finally my body relaxed among a crowd of older adults, who sat, distant and tired-eyed, on their way back up the hills after a long day of work.

Quarantine through the objects I touch each day

Glass Candlestick

There have been nights this quarantine where sleep feels impossible. It's a relief, then, when dawn finally lifts the sky's hue and I can rejoin the waking. I move to the window in the dining room, where I light a candle and watch its flame flicker against the pale sky. I have assembled all glass things at this window on purpose; something about the expansiveness I feel when light travels straight through things. I want the opposite of waking up to a phone in the face, to this morning's dead, to this morning's justice-void, to this morning's city on fire.

Jasmine Incense

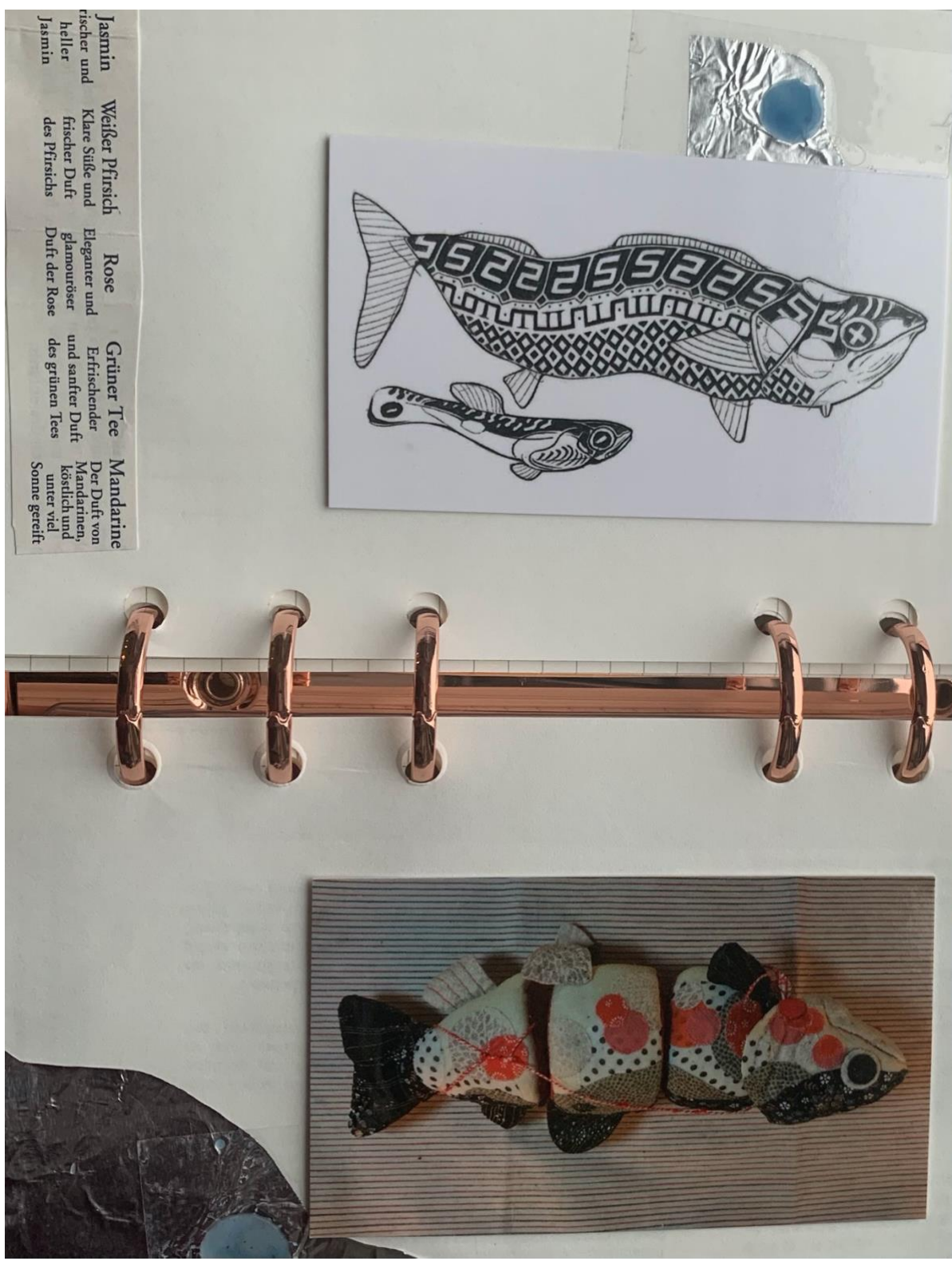
And so I light the incense, to watch the ribbon of smoke travel straight up the window and break into swirls. It smells like jasmine. Like the first time I smelled a night jasmine bush and knew I'd be searching for that scent forever. I found it again when I least expected to. I invited Matt to Sojo Spa in December, but when we got there the line wrapped around the block. We spent the day at the Japanese market instead, buying gifts for our friends. I bought the incense for me. Fragrant green sticks in a smooth wooden box.

Coffee Mug

No matter how scalding the tea, my hands feel insulated from danger by you. The best mug by far, and the heaviest. You were a present from the stepmom of an ex-boyfriend. I think he is a banker now. He said things like *feminism is not needed in a country like the United States*. We barely spoke the same language then. Would we recognize each other now? O, young self, I cannot blame you for what you swallowed in your quest to know love. The illusion that it's elsewhere evaporates eventually. O, beloved mug, I forgot you had a story.

Tiled Table

Four pillars of polished blonde wood topped with a white tiled surface. In the corners, folkloric painted flowers. What a gift it is to be able to stay at home, to pour the coffee, to run a blade through runny eggs, to tilt their yolks towards the sun like jewels, to arrange the fruit beneath the mint, to hear this morning's bread crunch. No running off to work. No bruised Chiquita banana on public transit. No plastic Starbucks cup condensation on my hands. Instead, a poem: *In the Spanish Kingdom / of my living room: / the morning sunshine.*



Jasmin
 Jasmin
 rischer und
 heller
 Jasmin

Weißer Pfirsich
 Klare Süße und
 frischer Duft
 des Pfirsichs

Rose
 Eleganter und
 glamouröser
 Duft der Rose

Grüner Tee
 Erfrischender
 und sanfter Duft
 des grünen Tees

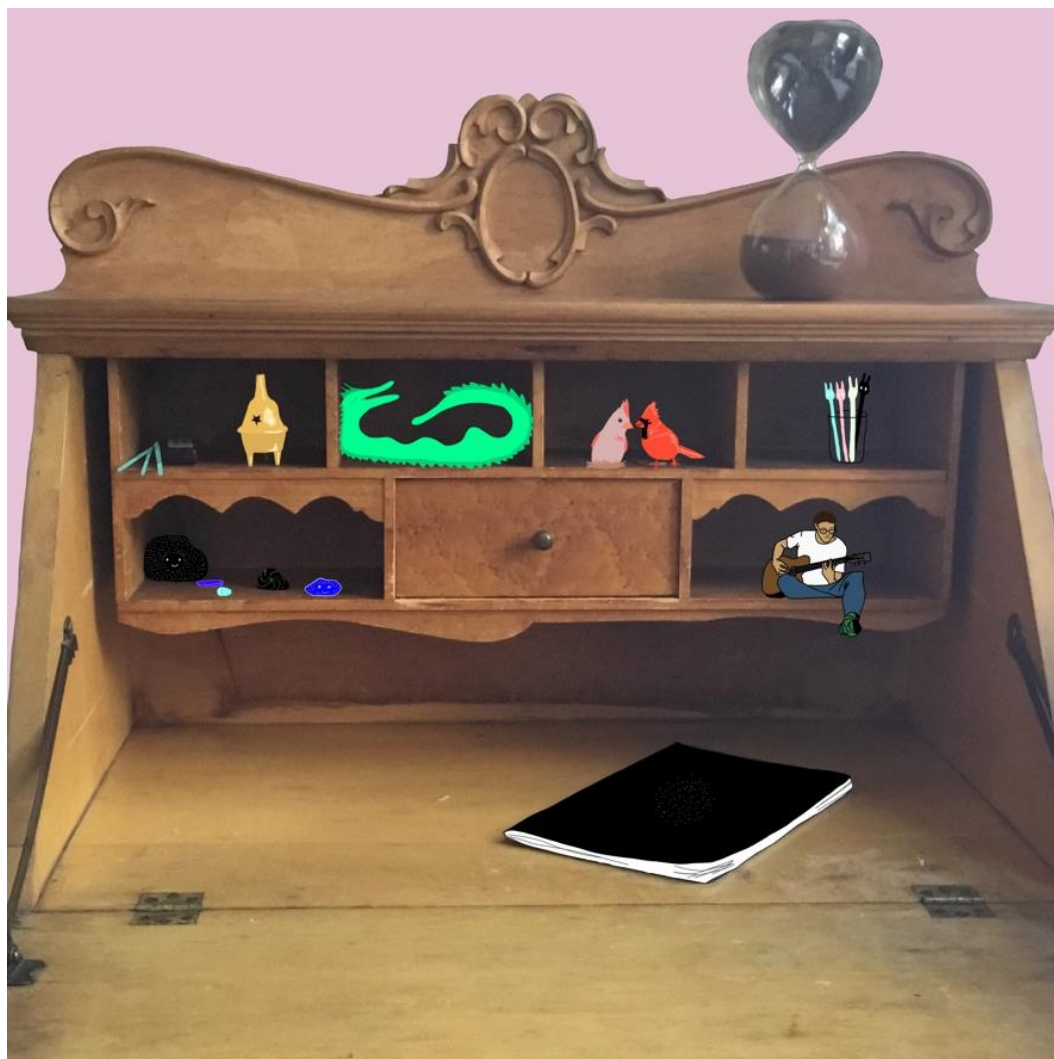
Mandarine
 Der Duft von
 Mandarinen,
 köstlich und
 unter viel
 Sonne gereift

Running Shoes

My psychiatrist said, “exercise every day, no excuse, it’s the best anti-depressant,” through the screen of a MacBook. I lace up the pink sneakers bought online and dutifully run each morning. It’s always the same route—down the slope of Spruce Hill, turn at the Vietnamese restaurant, jump over root-lifted sidewalks, and cover my respiration with my sweaty mask when I see people along the way. My breath starts to quicken at the bottom corner of Clark Park. The way back is a long green tunnel of trees. I run through it like a woman trying to save her life.

Ladies Secretary Desk

Sweet, old desk. We met earlier this summer and I fell into a fit of observational eros. I'm easily smitten by cuteness and this desk was exactly that: ladylike, elegant, delicate. I brushed the gnats and dust out of its corners. As I sat to write, a large doe arrived to sit in the grass outside my window, unfazed and restful. I brought the desk home and filled each little secret nook with other objects I love—lapis lazuli, a gifted tiger's eye stone, schist from the Wissahickon, the jasmine incense, cardinal feathers, and Muji pens. My private totem gallery.



Wine Glass

To drink everything out of. Tart red water infused with hibiscus petals and mint. Iced coffee with foamed milk at the top. Iced chai tea out of a metal straw. Tap water with an orange slice at the edge of my glass. Because, fuck it, why not? It's pretty, I'm home, and I want to feel like Rihanna walking out of a restaurant in the West Village with a stolen wine glass in hand. Except that I found this wine glass on the street in Fairmount in a box that said FREE. In my thrifted satin pajamas, I feel luxurious.

My Love's T-Shirt

These are our joint domestic projects: the morning coffee and breakfast spread, the home-cooked dinner, the tidying before bed, and the laundry, on occasion. Otherwise, we float around the apartment doing our own thing. You are always where I expect you to be—in the office wearing your headphones with a blue guitar in your lap, using your tapping feet and a computer program to give shape to a song. And I cheat on my writing with everything else—graffiti pens and canvas, a walk through the neighborhood with a camera, a kiss on your shoulder through your white t-shirt.

The Wind

The weekend before lockdown began, I danced at Toñitas in Brooklyn with a group of friends. It was a sweaty night, with all those bodies packed together around the pool table, sharing beer. Before that, I stared at one of Diego Rivera's crowded murals in a noisy wing of the Whitney. It didn't feel so special then, but I am amazed now that we used to gather. Tonight, the wind travels: carrying the sounds of popping fireworks, the chirps of bats and crickets, each quivering leaf, branches bobbing to its rhythm, it suspends aircrafts, before reaching me and igniting my arm.