

MUSEUM PIECE

“We are the holy relics
the scattered bones of a saint ...
We seek each other.”

—Gloria Anzaldúa,
from “Holy Relics”
(*Borderlands/La Frontera:
The New Mestiza*)



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I: SPOKEN

1

Los Angeles County/USC hospital emergency
room waiting area, Rooms 1050 and 1060:

We wait for our names.

We sit here and wait hours to hear our names.
Ten, eleven, fifteen. Twenty hours. Overhead,
several television sets blaring. Several languages
at once. At one point, a security guard, a woman
from Nigeria, reaches up to change the channel
of one of the televisions. Put it on English! a
white woman shouts. No more Spanish channels!

There is a stunned silence, which lasts maybe
a second or two, and then the room explodes in

jeers and laughter and a kind of benign hostility that recognizes, even if the racism in her cannot, the poverty, the suffering, the insanity and insecurity this white woman shares with everyone else here. The woman continues to argue. You should learn English she slurs at someone, no one, anyone, Or go back to Mexico. As she says this, an old veterano shuffling by says This *is* Mexico, *YOU* need to go back to *England*, taps the metal tip of his black cane against the tiled floor as he walks, as if identifying coordinates on a map, and chuckles behind his thick Zapata brocha; the room laughs again.

The room is clusters of family. Mothers and fathers huddled around broken sons. Partners folded into each other. Arms around shoulders, cool palms pressed to burning foreheads, foreheads pressing into chests, shoulders, the valleys of collar bone and neck. The wardrobe here is sweatpants, t-shirts, pajamas, slippers. Paint-splattered work jeans. Construction boots. The trail images of hastily abandoned moments. The movement, too, carries somnambulant remnants of stranded animation. The gestures. The placement of torso, and limbs. Some find a plastic seat, some squat against a wall, some drag back and forth over the contours of the waiting area.

The waiting area is really two large open rooms that connect to each other to make one big room. In each open room is a set of chairs, several rows, all the same color, all facing the same direction: blue and

east in one open area, orange and south in the other. The walls are a pinkish orange, there are fluorescent lights overhead, the floor is worn, yellowed tile. On the floor here and throughout the hospital are large straight lines painted various colors. Blue. Red. Purple. Orange. The colored lines run parallel to one another around corners and down halls, branching off to different areas, and you imagine they run for miles throughout this sprawling mini-city, this vast fortress of public institution. You are given directions to follow the lines to various parts of the hospital; I have followed one of these lines—yellow, or green, I can't remember which now—from the metal detector at the front entrance to this waiting area here.

In the waiting area are two vending machines that sell sodas and chips and cookies. There is a change machine that spits out quarters. There is a constant dull echoing, the collective chatter of the room—conversations, televisions, names being called over the loudspeakers, orders to proceed to the appropriate window or door. There is a smell of illness, injury, injustice, death.

When it comes finally, I am caught off guard. RuBÉN M—, a la ventana nueve. My body rises and moves to window nine automatically, by reflex, but it is not until I'm seated in front of it that I realize the linguistic source of my confusion and disorientation. The woman behind the glass asks if I would prefer we speak in English or Spanish—in

Spanish. I say, apologetically, English, and she does a double-take, verifies. It is her second language; it is increasingly the only one in which my mold-infested brain can function.

Later, waiting again to be called, I find myself reading Gloria Anzaldúa, Aimé Césaire, Cherríe Moraga, Frantz Fanon. There are only several weeks left until I'm scheduled to begin school, and even as I sit here in the emergency room, in a brain fog daze, I still try to hang on, still try to keep myself alive and functioning under the harsh glare of fluorescent lights and security guards and overhead surveillance cams, wading through the post-colonial imagery of lost fragmented bodies, the remembering of Osiris, the holy relics of a deceased saint, broken diasporic masks. Seated next to me: A young Chicano. Goatee, shaved head, slight-framed in baggy steel-blue jeans, immaculate white sneakers, layered t-shirts. The bottom t-shirt is white, the top t-shirt is a black Jack Daniel's Whiskey bottle label, oversized to fill the whole front of the shirt so that his belly and chest are transformed into a billboard, so that his upper torso looks like a giant bottle of whiskey. Next to him, pressed close to him, his woman, twice his weight at least and taller by about a head. Her hair is peroxide-streaked jet black, rolled up in a ball at the back of her skull and held in place with a plastic clip. She wears thick, dark burgundy lipstick, and velvet black eyeliner, thin, meticulously penciled-in eyebrows. She wears a black tanktop and aqua-blue leggings; the leggings

end halfway down her calves, and the contrast of blue on brown skin is sky and earth, ocean and wet sand, a pure horizon. Her feet are wide and flat and brown in paperthin flipflops, and she swings them back and forth, scraping grooves into the cold waiting room floor. She lets out long impatient sighs.

She is breathtaking.

The two sit shoulder to shoulder mostly, but at one point, the woman extends her bare arm back over her partner's shoulders, draws him in to her, enfolds him, anoints his tattooed skull with a rapid-fire succession of three fat, wet kisses. "I love your little bald head," she says. "So much."

"Re-member me," he says. It's unclear who is sick, who is the healer, whose name they are waiting for.

"Patience," she says.

He nods his chin back and forth across one soft slope of breast. "Scattered fragments of their genocide gather here. Mounting evidence. It doesn't go away; it only grows."

"Genocide can be swift and it can be a slow, patient thing," she says, kisses at the back of his neck.

"We need to be *more* patient," he says.

“Yes,” she says. “We need to be strong, and patient. In the end, their final victims will be every last one of their own selves.”

Across from them, the old veterano has found a seat, has been leaning forward, listening, his forearms crossed over his cane, the sleeves of his brown plaid Pendleton pulling up a little at the wrists, the wrists covered in the beginnings of faded tattoos that disappear into the sleeves. At these last words, he nods, taps his cane against the tile again, grins. “Simón,” he says. “The world as it will be.”

“Yes,” the woman says. “The world as it is, and the world as it will be.”

2

In the middle of the worst of it, when I'm breaking down completely, 2:30 in the morning, nervous system haywire, poisoned and feeling beyond repair, skin on fire with tiny pinpricks all over, waves like electric shocks running up and down my spine, my arms, my legs, and it all falls apart finally, I watch it slip away finally and see I can't hold it together anymore, the center no longer holds, this thing has taken over, completely, colonized my body completely, invaded my neural structures, and I watch it slip away, all my attempts at keeping it together, keeping organized, file folders and file boxes and reminder lists and carefully lettered tabs—in the middle of it, my sisters are there on the phone, calling me home, and my mother is there

on the phone, calling me home, and it's not what she says, but the way she says it: After all these years, her voice slips, modulates, shifts without her realizing it (I think) into a familiar cadence, a familiar voice—a Chicana voice, my grandma's voice, and through the feelings of desperation, the haze, the helpless paralysis, I see it—hear it: This language she has reserved, this language she has saved for the most important moments, the most important words of all—Don't worry, you'll be okay, we're gonna take care of you. Come home. Come home or I'll come get you and bring you home, so we can take care of you. You're gonna be okay. We'll make the doctors listen. We won't leave until they listen.

She doesn't hear it, but I hear it, there in my cellular telephone, there in my cellular structures. I hear the cadence, the language we never lost, the language we have reserved for this, the language that has reserved itself for all of us. I hear my grandma Pauline's voice in this voice, my grandma deceased not much more than a year now. My mother doesn't hear it in her comfort language, because she is that language; not the speaker of that voice, but the voice itself. This is how the language of the ancestors works. You become it; it is you.

It's been there all along, waiting for this moment, biding its time in the shadows of all those tongues to which we have been yoked, all those tongues we have used to lash at one another, to hide, obscure, avoid, void.

Come home, she says, and I hear her, I understand her, we understand each other completely.

II: WRITTEN

1

At some point, I find myself remembering something. I look back over my notes. I go back six months. A year. Two years. I pull out stories as I go, set them aside in a pile, and the pile grows, a stack of evidence, damning proof. Soon it's all there: One story after another about disease, infection, viral agents.

Even more specific: In one scene, it's the middle of a perfect summer day and I walk along the countryside. I stomp my boots on dry dirt roads. I kick up dust and spores. Eventually, I notice a strange silence. It's the total absence of sound, it's the exact opposite of sound. I listen for the sound of white blood cells. I listen for the sound of dust settling back onto the road. When I hear nothing, I undress, and squat, and begin to chew on my toes.

Later, I find myself choking at several different points, in several different contexts. And the breathing—I speak of breathing, over and over. Breathing. Choking. Spores. Disease.

And it comes to me: This thing that has happened to me, this sickness in my sinuses and lungs—I have put it there. I have created this from words, from punctuation and phonetic structure. I have written this into my life.

The mold spores, they love paper and other organic cellulose materials. The paper is cellulose, and the spores lodge themselves in it the same way they lodge themselves in my esophagus and my lungs to colonize and attack my own cellular structures. They lodge themselves and wait to germinate, or to become airborne again, to ride an unsuspecting inward breath, to settle in your skull, in your lungs, to bloom there, colonize, emit toxins, tweak your brain, tweak your very being.

Even now, as I write this, I know these words are only part me. Sometimes I must stop typing and fight, wrestle back the words they are stealing from me. Because they like words too. They like to settle there in the spaces between letters and syllables and colonize, and devour, decompose and spread sick slime over grammatical syntax, and feed on words the way they feed on me, as if we have ceased to live, as if we are already dead, as if death has found us already dead. They go to work immediately decomposing the dead; and whatever is not already dead, they kill in their efforts to decompose. They harvest our dreams, leave us weak, debilitated, fatigued. This is how they feed their young. This is how they stay alive. This is how we cease to live,

and—

Shh. Close your eyes.

2

San José, California.

I have come back home from Los Angeles.

We tour the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum, my mother and I, between my trips to the hospital, the doctor, the drugstore. The museum's rooms are dark, all of them made to feel below ground regardless of what level they actually occupy. There is a replica of an Egyptian tomb, dimly lit, complete with hieroglyphic-carved stone walls and a cool, quiet air. There are ancient hand mirrors and hair extensions, sandals, combs, millennial vanities encased behind glass.

(In ancient Egypt, the application of makeup was an act of worship for both men and women.)

(In ancient Egypt, the Nile river god Hapi was both woman and man, god of the north and the south, arising from two whirlpools, the source of fertility and life.)

I linger over the texts of each display, lose myself in the words. I read about Isis and Osiris, the remembering of lost tributaries and lost body parts and lost limbs. I read about the ancient artists

of Egypt, how they were charged with creating representations of the world not as it actually was, but as it should be.

The world as it should be. I have spent so much of the last few years building and tearing down and rebuilding in my mind the world as it should be—ideas, theories, political platforms and parties, movements, ideologies. Now I find myself here, below ground, surrounded by the ancient artifacts of several dead, dusty empires, by mummified corpses, by a cool, dark, mausoleic air, diseased.

Tombs. Glass displays.

The scarab beetle pushes the sun across the sky, the ancient scribe has contact with every aspect and level of Egyptian society, the man engages a dispute with his Ba, his soul, in hieroglyphics on the side of a clay vessel, contemplating suicide—graffiti even then nothing more than a long suicide note-slash-plea for recognition stretching wide over spatial and temporal constraints—his Ba saying to him, “Are you not a man? Are you not yet alive? What do you gain by complaining about life like a wealthy man?”

(The Egyptians, too, had their wealthy, and their slaves, and their suicidal scribes.)

Surrounded by illness, surrounded by death, surrounded by the full extent of my mother’s love, and the world as it is, and nothing more, nothing less.

3

The first writing comes some 5,000 years ago in Mesopotamia, the Tigris and Euphrates River Valley.

Present-day Iraq. The world as it is.

Pictograms on clay tablets. Cuneiform symbols. Monetary exchange, financial transactions. There are examples behind the museum's glass. Partially disintegrated papyrus. Shards of clay covered with minute inscriptions.

I picture that same valley now, that valley in this moment, a chaotic snarl of shards and rubble and broken bits of glass, chips and spalls of fallen rock, concrete, metal, all lit up an eerie glowing green, nightvision sky green and black with falling bombs, television screens green and black with falling bombs worlds away. In the background, in the black green haze, the hulked shapes of cowering families and glowering tanks, defiant guerrilla fighters, corpses rotting in the sights of precision crosshairs—

The new face of monetary exchange. The new stench of financial transaction.

In the background, museums looted, disemboweled. In the background oil fields burning. In the background words demolished flattened smashed deep into earth's clay buried under hammer blow of one thousand pound smart bombs, words

disintegrated, dissolved, shards disseminated like dry dead fragments of contaminated seed condemned to dust far beneath the possibility of contact with any surface nourishment or light. Words obliterated, truth obliterated, history obliterated and repeated and obliterated again.

4

Another replica behind glass: Nebuchadnezzar's barrel cylinder. On the cannelured face of this cylinder designed for official seals and proclamations, the king describes the building of the temple for Lugal-Marada in ancient Babylon—ancient Iraq:

“Kill those who do not agree with me, break their weapons, destroy the whole land of the enemy...May your fierce weapons, which do not spare the enemy, stand erect and sharp to kill the enemy.”

Through two layers of glass, from the opposite side of the display case that houses the barrel cylinder, I watch my mother as she compares the ancient weapons next to Nebuchadnezzar's words. In this space between us, in the silent, enclosed air here, are the voices of the dead, the invisible, the disappeared.

I am still thinking of war, of present-day Iraq. I am still thinking of a way to convince my mother, convince her husband—convince all of them, all of those who support this death. She sees the same

weapons; she sees the same barrel cylinder, the same words. She looks through the display case, waves at me—

I wave back, but I know that I am invisible to her.

(In the background oil fields burning.)

(In the background the women controlled the music. Temple Musicians. Temple Muses. Songstresses. Sistrums, harps, voices, flutes.)

(In the background noise static of television images melting one into another, a ceaseless palimpsest of vision and sound, words rolling, unscrolling, copying and recopying—

...KILL THOSE WHO DO NOT AGREE WITH US...DESTROY THE WHOLE LAND...DO NOT SPARE THE ENEMY...)

(In the background a few women who could read or write, owing to a scribe in the household—a scribe's mother perhaps, or a sister; the rest: all boys, learning their trade purely by rote, boys copying and recopying ancient texts, boys copying and recopying boys copying and recopying.)

(In the background the ancient texts whirling, the barrel cylinders rolling official seals over clay over papyrus over the whole of the land, the barrel cylinders rolling over time and space and history, obliterating, repeating, obliterating, repeating.)

The world as it is; the world as it should be.

Later, when we return from the museum to my mother's house, she tells me, shyly, about the writing exercise that she has been working on. She has been reading a book on how to write and has completed a short piece about one of her earliest memories. I am fatigued and weak, but she wants to share this with me, and I want to share it with her too, I want to be excited to share it with her, and in my heart, underneath the mental fog, the buzzing limbs, the paralyzing exhaustion, I am. Underneath the numbness to which I've succumbed in my illness, I am moved deeply to see how much she cares about what I think, that she would care at all what I might think of her writing. She hands me the loose pages as I sit at the dinner table and then she busies herself somewhere else in the house while I read, before returning and sitting next to me.

The story is about her first trip away from home and away from her family and her mother, my grandma Pauline. She was four years old, the family was moving from Durango, Colorado, to Denver, Colorado, she would leave with her older sister earlier than the rest of the family and stay with an aunt and uncle and cousins and wait for the rest to arrive. She describes the bus ride over a gorgeous landscape (later I will suggest she give more detail—gorgeous in what way?—and she will admit that she doesn't actually remember the specific physicality of it). She describes a pause in the trip, when a shepherd and his flock crossed the road

and forced the bus to stop (she will tell me later that her grandfather, my grandmother's father, was a sheepherder in this region, and I will wonder how far back our sheepherders go—before Gadsden? before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo? before Escalante and Dominguez and the fleshing out of the Slave Trail?) She describes her uncle washing coins in his basement for his vending machine business, inviting her down to help him, sharing with her white Wonder Bread smothered in white Miracle Whip, the best thing she had tasted up to that point in her four-year-old life, and her sense of wonder, dazzled by the sparkling coins, the white bread, the Miracle Whip dressing.

I read the story and make some suggestions—minor changes in grammar, some areas to focus on, develop. I tell her it is good, because it is; I am impressed, I can see how much work she has put into this, and I point out to her—gently, testing waters in this politically right-wing, conservative home—how her story could be read as a Chicana narrative—displacement, diaspora, the anachronistic, almost surreal intrusion of the sheepherder into the bus's modern-day path, the nostalgia for home and mother and family. We talk about my grandma Pauline, who spent her last years here in my mother's house, her memory slowly draining from her as her eyes skittered more and more over people and things only she could see. We talk about my grandma's marriage to a German-American honkytonk musician, a

guitarist who scabbled up out of a sprawling, dirt-poor, Arkansas family—my mother’s father, my grandpa Monty (my grandpa, also, dead less than a year now). We talk about Aztlan and ancient geography and patterns of migration. We talk about the scattered limbs of the earth-moon goddess Coyolxauhqui, dismembered by her own brother Huitzilopochtli, the war god of the sun, in the Aztecs’ shift to imperialism and war. We talk about their mother, Coatlicue, and her transformation from the embodiment of balanced female/male duality and the source of all life to the wandering La Llorona wailing for her scattered, lost children. We talk about the collisions of cultures. Conquests and landgrabs. Nomadic drifting. Homeland insecurity.

My mother seems surprised by all this, takes it in, thinks about it quietly, attempting to position herself maybe somewhere along this thread that I am trying to unravel. She distrusts a little (and rightly) the political agenda behind my interpretation. But she seems pleased, even if I don’t quite make sense in the rambling difficulty I have articulating my semi-coherent ideas. I rush the words—trying to get it all out before this opening closes, before I lose the thread of my ideas to the ever-present threat of creeping fog—and the words tumble off my tongue, tangle in my lap.

At some point, I pause, on the brink of pushing further, then stop and decide not to go any deeper than this—into for example Wonder Bread and

Miracle Whip, sparkling coins, more complex issues of assimilation. The things we acquire; the things we lose; the things taken from us. I recognize my position of privilege here, the sacrifices my mother has made to make that position a reality, and the sacrifices she has made after a lifetime of struggle to secure her own position of economic privilege and security. I recognize that this thread is tenuous, this reconnection we have made here fragile, the wounds fresh still. I feel my heart swell at this gift she has given me, I set aside the anger, the flashpoints, try to focus on the healing, the points of union.

There are things I do not say, things we both do not say. There are always things you do not say. This is the parasite on the underside of our family's history. Silent debates over immigrants' rights, labor unions, welfare reform; silenced arguments over power structures and hierarchies and systems of control imposed on us, on our family, and maintained equally from within and without. The persistent underlying tension in the conflict over the narratives we have chosen to witness and align with our selves, the stories we choose to embrace, and continue telling—mine, the story of the oppressed, of the defiant and the dissident, the disenfranchised, the dispossessed; hers, the story of the dominant, the oppressors, the landgrabbers and slaveholders and occupiers. Both histories tangle, snarl in our veins. Both histories threaten to swallow us in an implosion of silence and disappearance, as colonizer and colonized, native and invader, collide, dissolve

one into the other on a violent razor's edge of assimilation, genocide, defiance.

We sit here in the living room of my mother's large suburban home, her German-American husband's home, a home at which I was not welcome as recently as a year ago, and I can see she is like me trying to break out, still, even after all that's passed. I'd thought she had locked herself in a long time ago, into the silence and stability and comfort of her conservative life, chosen to skate that muted surface dance of avoidance and silence and passive-aggressive denial.

And she has, a part of me realizes and admits it, admits that some part of her is lost, that some part of her will die here in this place, this suburban in the words of my sister "very expensive tomb." But I recognize also that it's the same part I've lost as well, the same part of me that will die in the tombs I have built from my own limitations, my own clumsy efforts to secure stability and a sense of belonging, my own missteps around the fire of assimilation and defiance.

And yet, despite all this—her story, she is telling her story, she is teaching herself on a ninth-grade education how to write, so she can remember, so she can tell her story in the new presence of my grandmother's absence; and it's real, in her story I hear clearly the echoes of our family, our history, our people—displacement, memory, loss, geospatial relationships, not simply a longing for

home, but for a home to have been there in the first place, for a home to still be there now, a longing for that longing, however dubious, that others are allowed, that nostalgia others carry with them to ward off the erasure, carry forward out of the past into the ongoing construction / deconstruction / reconstruction of a future.

I think of my own childhood home, the space of my own earliest memories, and it is now just that. Erased, the entire street neighborhood community sculpted over with a fancy park for fancy people who will jog along its gently winding paths in the mornings and evenings, who will walk their dogs, who will pass by this spot unaware that a part of me is still here, still lives here, still looks out across crumbly, gravelly Regent Street at the graffiti-covered overpass walls that hang like a sigh around the Guadalupe River, and then down at the river, into the Guadalupe, the mud and earth beneath, and deeper still. The house, the community, exists now only in our memories—my sisters' memories, the memories of my mother and father.

I find myself thinking of refugees. Everywhere are multitudes of refugees, their numbers mounting daily, huddled in the shadows of violence and oppression and their denied Rights of Return, denied not only by politics and guns and economic terrorism, but by the simple, literal, bulldozed obliteration of what was once their home, their street, their neighborhood, their community—their

nostalgia circumvented, mocked, denied; even if they were somehow miraculously allowed to exercise their rights, they know and their oppressors know that they would no longer have anything to which they could viably return, anything which they could recognize as something once connected to the realities of their lives. Water stolen, diverted, drained. Land flattened, depleted, laid waste to.

Not that my loss compares to this. I only understand, a little. I understand that in the hands of the decomposers soon we will all be refugees—as the world is further diminished, as we are further diminished, as any connection left between the two is further polluted, subverted, denied—

—already, I think, we are all some kind of refugee or other. My mother here in her suburban fortress, surrounded by white mini-vans emblazoned with tiny stickers of the U.S. flag. My sister entrenched in the checkout line at a fancy grocery store, waiting on spoiled fancy people, absorbing the abuse of the rich on the frontlines of a new, more sanitized, but no less vicious kind of class war. And me, running from disease, from parasitic toxic mold, from the colonization that has spread throughout my internal structures, decomposition setting in, erasure, dissolution.

—I am not yet dead, I tell the decomposers. We are not yet dead.

The moment of leaving lasts several days. I cannot bring myself to go. I cannot face the shards of life left behind in Los Angeles. There is so little now to cling to. If I fall apart again, I know I will flail and grasp at air and sink and drown for good. All of my belongings, contaminated now, have been discarded, destroyed. What little remains sits in a small six-by-ten storage locker in the middle of a vast, chaotic city that feels less and less familiar each day I spend away from it, each day I sink further into illness.

We walk along the creek behind my mother's house. This creek is a tributary. It feeds the Guadalupe River. We walk on a small asphalt bicycle road and then on a smaller dirt path that branches off and follows along the creek, along the meandering sound of water runneling over and around impromptu weirs of stones, leaves, fallen branches. There are black walnut trees, solitary under brooding, leafless canopies of branchings that explode upward and out in all directions, taper off into finer and finer points against the late afternoon sky, dissolving into sky—from a distance, it is the infinite complexity of cellular structures, dendrites and axons branching over and into one another, in search of one another. There are old knotted oaks twisting, spreading up at angles out of thick, sprawled roots, their bark hides thick, scabrous, alligator. There are the tapered ovals of red willows like squat candle flames burning red against a yellow background of dry grass and soft

hills, and weeping willows dragging over water, and red manzanita bushes gnarled and twisted and stooped, groping at the ground for something lost, half-remembered, denied. My mother points out dill along the bank and I smell it, and clip a few sprigs to take back with me. We pick up trash. We talk about the fish in these rivers and creeks—steelhead trout, migrating Chinook and Coho salmon. Contaminated by mercury mining. Inedible.

Later, we walk around my mother's back yard, which she has filled with trees and plants, flowers, herbs. She shows me the avocado tree, the Japanese maple, the fragrant, hanging wisteria. She shows me squash and a large bush of Asian chili peppers, a spectacular stippling of green, black, red—various stages of ripening, and strength. She shows me lamb's ear, cilantro, yerba buena. I hold the leaves of each in my fingers, bend and lower my face to them, draw in their scents. In one corner of the yard is a compost pile, and she points out the tomato plant and white Baby's Breath and other flowers that have sprung up out of it, spontaneously. Here, in the middle of this fancy, exclusive suburb, my mother has covered nearly the entire back yard with a wild tangle of chaos and life that pushes at the boundaries of the fence and house, threatens to jump its borders and gobble up the sculpted neighborhood in a wild inhale of unbound thirst. It is life she has helped create, life she can name, life whose various purposes she still understands and articulates.

In the dining room again, we sit and talk and I break down. There is the frustration, the disappointment; I'm dropping out of school, my job hangs by a thread, my relationships have dissolved to perfunctory performances of torn paper masks. There is the pride, my clean record of self-sufficiency broken for the first time since leaving home as a teen. And there is the fear.

The fear that I will leave my mother's home and drive six hours and fall to pieces again, and this time, not find the strength to get back up. The fear that I will leave my mother's home and drive six hours and not fall to pieces, but carry on, numbed, hollowed out, a shell occupying the shell of a former life. The fear of the world as it is now; the fear of the world as it will be.

The fear that I will no longer see the world as it could be.

In the final moments, my mother breaks down too. She doesn't want me to go. She misses me already, misses what has occurred here this past week even before it has come to an end. This reconnection. This re-remembering. We sit in the dining room and the house feels large and hollowed out around us. Though it is filled with the detritus of garage sale scavenges and online Internet auction purchases, there is an emptiness. It's an atmosphere overflowing with emptiness, and absence—the absence of my grandma, who spent her last years

here in her own brain fog and schizophrenic haze, talking to her Baby Jesus doll, talking to the invisible people she saw sitting on the couch, or sitting outside in the background, in the trees (she also carried with her memories of the old house by the Guadalupe River, and memories of Colorado, of honkytonks and sheepherders and our shared Mexican and Ute ancestry)—and the absence of my mother's father-in-law; he, too, spent his last years here in a haze of his own, blowing softly on a harmonica, shuffling around in thick wool slippers, his own memories encased behind large, thick-framed glasses and a sly grizzled grin.

I know now. I understand, a little, the suffering they experienced, the loss of control, the helplessness. I know the grappling for coherence, the handing over of your life to another. There is a grayness and you watch it approach and you find yourself slipping downward into it, slowly at first, then picking up speed exponentially. It is terrifying in its silence, its swiftness, its subtle, irreversible shifts and the unrelenting gravity it exerts upon your body. The grayness wraps over and around and pulls. The grayness slips in wisps and feather trails into and through the folds and crevices, the gaps, overwhelming, coming up underneath and on all sides, until all there is, is gray. The silence wraps around.

There is a barrier between you and the world, a muffling. You watch the world acting, speaking, and you are acutely aware of how normal it all is,

how taken for granted. They have no idea. They look at you and they see the normalcy reflected and they think you look a little tired, a little worn out maybe, but you are still a part of the normal world, still treated as one of the normal, the healthy. But underneath you struggle to maintain that mask, you stop and start, restart, formulate words and actions very carefully before letting them loose. Your existence is built on extreme care, meticulous caution, and for a while, they're fooled. Inside, you know you have crossed over into that realm of the infirm, the terminally debilitated, but on your face, all they see is mask still, the mask you wear in perpetual fear of that moment when it will slip, shift; the mask you wear in place of the chaos, the incoherence you feel pulling at you from below—

7

—the mask you wear as you drive this road, obscured behind the slant of windshield glass. You have driven this road hundreds of times over the years, back and forth, carving the trace of your motion into the asphalt tar. Over time, these trips have blurred the focus of home from one place to another. You have driven this road until home became foreign and foreign space became home. You know the rest stops, the gas stations, the miles between landmarks. You know where to turn on your headlights during the day; turn off your air conditioner to avoid overheating; open your window so that the smell of freshly picked garlic washes over and around you. You know the major

connecting points, the smaller wandering tributaries, the speed traps. You know the movement and flow here, the blurred motion between homes. You know that something is lost in this. Here, a road twists off the main highway and you know that it will wander up into the hills and then break off at some point, abruptly maybe, or into perhaps a softer paving and then dirt and then nothing. You know that you will never follow this road. You make your way back and forth from home to home until both are and neither is, until all that's left is the movement, the blur. You set the emergency brake down and wave and your mother stands on the corner and waves and watches until you've turned the next corner, and maybe a little longer. Near to where she stands, a green fig has fallen from the white-branched tree in her front yard and exploded open on the sidewalk, the sidewalk bright, clean, bone white. The fig's thickly seeded burgundy-pink insides are rotting already and covered with ants. The ants swarm, devouring, carrying off miniscule bits of flesh. *(At the microscopic level, too, the flesh carried off, broken down by even tinier decomposers.)* For a moment, she stands there outside, next to her husband's house, and watches the movement of the ants—precise, meticulous. They have formed a trail that extends over the concrete several feet, and then disappears into grass.

This is the image you carry forward with you as it unwinds outward, tributary to tributary, feeding one to the next.

III: EPILOGUE—SILENCED/HEARD

(...I am somewhere over the Grapevine, I'm remembering something else, something that might have happened, might have been a dream. Beyond words. Vibrating. Dissolving.

...eyes half-open, body twisted on orange plastic, and across from me, I see him there, arms still crossed over his black cane, leaning forward, watching me. Black, warm eyes. Teardrop tattoos. Underneath his brocha, a sly grin playing on closed lips. And I can't tell if I'm awake, because there's no sound coming from his lips, and yet the words are there, streaming between us, I can hear him, we share molecules, atoms, imaginary particles at the quantum level, histories travel, cross, intermingle...

"...the world as it is, the world as it could be..."

"...you're sick, ése—but you're not yet dead."

...and then, he's sighing, pushing himself to a standing position, still grinning, still silent, then shuffling off toward the door to the main hall. At the doorway, he stops and turns back. "Ahí te watcho. Carnál."

Above us, the television, muffled, distant, light shifting, images bouncing across space, illusion, shadow—

He turns again, disappears out into the crowded hall.

