

16

MIRAGES OF IMAGINARY EXILE

Richard Blanco

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For my parents' exile from their blood-warm rain of Cuba to Madrid's frozen pinging rooftops the February afternoon I was born. A tiny brown and wrinkled blessing counter to such poverty that my first crib was an open drawer cushioned with towels in an apartment shared by four families. Such as my mother told me for years, kindling my imagination still burning to understand that slipping into being when my longing to belong first began.

(Blanco 35)

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The question of exile was born in me even before I was born. It's no wonder, considering that I was *made in Cuba, assembled in Spain, and imported to the United States*, as I like to say. A pithy epigraph for my life that also serves to explain how my mother, seven months pregnant with me, left Cuba with the rest of my nuclear family and arrived as exiles to Madrid where I was born in 1968. Forty-five days later, they immigrated once more to New York City with me in tow, eventually settling in Miami where I would be raised. Only a few weeks old, I figuratively already belonged to three countries, and yet to none (in fact, I had no legal standing as a citizen of any country until age 17). I've come to understand these circumstances as the genesis of an inherited and inherent sense of exile that has themed my life's journey, still abides with me, and permeates my poetry. In his essay, *Imaginary Homelands*, Salman Rushdie notes: "writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt" (10). However, I'm not truly an emigrant nor a *real* exile. I haven't lost any real homeland, none that I could choose or not choose to reclaim and refashion

through memory. My exile is an imaginary one, which is uniquely perplexing, elusive, and frustrating. I have no fixed place to gaze back at and turn into a pillar of salt. Instead, my fate has been to figuratively spend my life wandering through a proverbial desert, chasing some illusion of homeland glimmering in the distance, a perpetual series of mirages that disappear every time I get close to them, then reappear miles away, and out of my reach again.

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My name is and isn't *Ricardo De Jesús Blanco-Valdés*—christened for the sunlit and sea-song past of my parents' island, carrying withered memories of their homeland like dry rose petals pressed in a book that someday I'd need to crack open, read into the middle of a story I'd need to reclaim, finish, and call my own.

(Blanco 35)

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Luckily, my mother was able to smuggle most of her cherished photo albums out of Cuba. *Gracias a Dios*, she would repeatedly appeal to us, *at least we have these to survive on*. She kept the albums on display atop the family room coffee table as a perpetual reminder of the who *we* really were, a timeline of images and a lifeline to *our* true lives on the island before *our* exile. In one of the most tender, most revelatory memories of my childhood, I'm snuggled next to her on the sofa, paging through those albums as she captions every snapshot she points to, her voice thin and soft with melancholy: "this is the house with the dirt floor where I grew up. . . . this is the clock tower at the sugar mill where your abuelo worked. . . . this is the gazebo of el prado where your father first kissed me. . . . this is our first house beside the reservoir. . . . this is your brother giggling on the front porch swing." She speaks to me in present tense: everything *is*, not *was*, as if nothing had been lost, as if everything still existed for me to access and claim alongside her, as if we shared the same memories. Many years later, I will realize that her nostalgic gloss of those photos had conjured up my first mirage of a homeland and marked the moment I first became an imaginary exile. As an adult, I will return to those albums, looking for some *self* in photos taken years before I was even born. As a poet, I will reread the invisible ink of her voice, inspiring me to write my own captions for a seemingly indelible life in Cuba that I never lived, nor lost. But before then, before I would begin walking toward the mirage of my *Cubaness*, I had to contend with the mirage of my *Americaness*.

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The papery curtains of my bedroom fluttering with the speechless moon that spoke to me about loneliness, distance, journey, echoed by the palm tree sways against my window rustling a lullaby every night while I mumbled my prayers in English, then Spanish: glory be to all the light and the

shadow, the wonder and noise, the confusion and calm of my childhood—
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

(36)

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To paraphrase Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist, Liz Balmaseda: “we love living in Miami because it’s so close to the United States.” With incredible wit and whimsy, she concisely captured what I experienced firsthand growing up in Miami, which was very *un*-diverse. Diversity is a relative notion: from the outside looking in, Miami certainly was a Latinized, diverse city in contrast to other cities; but looking from the inside out, it wasn’t. By far, the majority of my classmates and their families shared our same story of exile and ethnicity. The *weird* kids in my school were *los americanos*, those few with pale skin and freckles; those who ate peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches at lunch, didn’t speak Spanish, and had peculiar family names like Johnston or Thompson. They were the minority, the *other*, not me, not my family, not my community, nor the city at large, which was saturated by Cuban culture. The sociodynamics of this setting had a profound and complex effect on the development of my sense of homeland and self. In one respect, feeling a part of the very societal fabric of the city, I grew up culturally well-grounded with a strong sense of empowerment (and even a tad bit of entitlement). I never felt alienated, victimized, or discriminated against. Ironically, however, this made me take for granted my given Cuban culture and heritage. These were too familiar, too commonplace. Consequently, I initially rejected them, to a degree; after all, I didn’t want to be like everybody else. I wanted to be different. I wanted to stand out. I wanted to be that *other*, from the *other* homeland, which meant being an *americano*, instead of a *cubano*.

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My name is and isn’t Richard, a translation I began to call myself by, yearning to write myself into my other story, my other role, my other fictional character as a straight white boy of color in an American drama I didn’t quite understand, either.

(35)

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But what did I know about being a *real* American? Not much—only what I saw on TV commercials and reruns of shows of 1950s and 1960s like *The Brady Bunch*, *Leave It to Beaver*, and *My Three Sons* since childhood. That was how my second mirage of homeland appeared in the distance. I wanted to someday, somehow be a part of that televised America of charming suburban streets lined with elms and homes with immaculate lawns and double car garages; where mothers, unlike my mother, were all elegant housewives who would cook dinner wearing pearl chokers and pleated skirts; where fathers, unlike my father, didn’t have two jobs, would come home every night to read the newspaper in their slippers and say *I*

love you at bedtime; where boys, unlike me, all had shiny-new bicycles and were never shoved or called *sissy*. Having never traveled outside Miami, I truly believed that TV version of America really existed. The entirety of my childhood and adolescence was confounded by this cultural standstill as an imaginary exile caught between the mirages of my American and Cuban homelands.

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Those lovesick nights that dead-ended with a sunrise on the beach, wading through my ache in every wave dying at my feet. My mind hovering with the seagulls screeching questions into the wind, terrified I'd never belong to anything but anonymous sky. The skyline's trove of ruby and diamond lights waning over the bay like sinking treasure . . .

(36–37)

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Of course, what I'm describing presently is in retrospect, a flashback of my life that I've been slowly rewinding, unwinding, reviewing, and rendering as I've grown older and older. At age eight, 12, or 19, I wasn't consciously nor intellectually concerned with *mirages* of homelands and self-identifying as an *imaginary exile*. Though subconsciously these notions certainly were imprinting my psyche, I was just going about my life, negotiating the *usual* things while trying to carve an identity for myself—in other words, engaged in the unfolding of my coming-of-age story, but with a twist. As I would eventually understand it, mine was a *cultural*-coming-of-age story. As a young adult, that *big* moment finally came when I asked myself that *big* question: *Where am I from?* A question which had always been with me, in some respect, but suddenly it became urgent. I needed to know where I came from in order to know where I was going, as the old adage goes. Luckily, the answer had been right before my eyes since childhood—and still was. At the time, I was working in my uncle's Cuban grocery store surrounded by a living culture, alive in the faces and smiles, voices, and sighs of the employees and regulars who frequented the store. There was the seamstress Raquel, still lamenting the death of her son killed by Fidel Castro revolutionaries. There was Felipe, who picked empty boxes from the dumpster to build a cardboard model of his treasured Havana. There was Victor, missing yet hating his life in Cuba as a gay man. And there I was, too, absorbing all their stories of loss and resilience, struggle and joy. Throughout the years I worked at the store, I came to recognize that their stories—like the stories of my parents and grandparents—were the stories out of which I was born, which also belonged to me.

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For the terra-cotta roof and tattered lawn chair patio of the home that raised me in Miami, soothed by the mango tree shadows of our backyard. Their tangy-ripe scent stirring in with the incense of *comino* and *laurel* rising

from *Mamá's* pots of *frijoles negros*, the taste of my birthright at dinner every night.

My father listening to 8-tracks of Cuban *danzones*, slumped in the family room sofa alone with a glass full of rum and empty eyes. My *Abuelo's* front-porch stories of all *we* lost to *la revolución*: *our* farmhouse, *our* jasmine trees, *our* dog, Pancho.

(36)

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Although those stories of exile and homeland weren't yet exactly clear to me, I was overcome with an urgent need to emotionally, intellectually, and artistically begin walking toward that mirage. As such, I returned to page through my mother's photo albums, barraging her with all my questions of *who, when, how, what, and why*, which I had never asked. I began listening to Cuban music and learned how to dance *danzón* and *salsa*. I began comparing the static history I had read in text books with the living history of Cuba I'd heard told through family lore. And I began writing poetry, which was perhaps the most important and enduring consequence. Poetry became (and remains) a method of engaging with the complex layers of the exilic experience, real and imagined. Serendipitously, my very first assignment in my very first graduate creative writing class was: *Write a poem about America*. Ironically, the poem I wrote triggered an even stronger yearning to dive into my Cuban identity, instead of my American one. Or I should say, it prompted me to take a deeper look at the yin-yang of these identities that defined each other by contrast. In the years that followed, besides honing my craft skills in poetry, I also began to see the poet's role as an *emotional historian*, charged with recording the emotional truth of my Cuban-American generation, as well as that of the exile community in Miami that raised me, so to speak: stories like those of Raquel, Felipe, Victor, and my parents and grandparents, which would never be recorded in newspapers or magazines as truthfully or with as much nuance as they would through the art of poetry. I also took to heart what Anaïs Nin notes: "We write to taste life twice" (149). And that's exactly what I was doing through my poetry—revisiting all the memories of my childhood and adolescence, recording their consequences, and the appearance of my mirage of a Cuban homeland that I would eventually attempt to reach. Before then, however, I would have to contend with yet another mirage.

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For the end of that sinless child when I began to question why god was love—everywhere and in everything—yet I belonged nowhere and to no one, unable to love even myself or let myself be loved. Even after I dared love men instead of women, and my youth burst like the dusk-red blooms of the poincianas, their beauty surrendered all at once. I withered like their petals strewn over the same city streets I wore down driving to nightclubs

where I needed to feel at home under dancefloor lights and against the stubble of men with phone numbers I knew not to call, inked on cocktail napkins or my forearm.

(Blanco 36)

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At age 25, I came out as a gay man, at first only to myself and the LGBTQ community. Crossing that threshold involved extensive contemplation and self-analysis. In taking inventory of my life, I realized that ever since my childhood as a gay boy I had been experiencing another kind of exile, and a yearning for the mirage of another kind of homeland which I had never known either: not a country but rather a psychological and emotional state of mind. Homeland in the sense of safe space, a place where someday I could live freely without fear or shame, and feel proud of who I was, whole and at home at last. I had believed that coming out would be an instant *passport* to that *somewhere over the rainbow* where I would spend the rest of my days in a *happily ever after*. But it soon proved to be much more complicated and challenging than I had thought. Besides having to deal with all the emotional complexities of resocializing myself as a gay man, I also became aware that my homosexual identity didn't completely define me. Thus began the negotiation of my triple longing to define not only my gay-self but also my American-self and Cuban-self: three distinct kinds of imaginary exile with distinct mirages of homeland, each of which I would investigate separately and simultaneously, beginning with Cuba.

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For the half of me who never lived in Cuba, yet remembers it as if I was returning to its chartreuse fields and turquoise-laced coasts coloring my eyes again for the first time as the plane descends toward the land of which I am a descendant. I step into a mirage of myself haunted by impossible memories of who I was and would be had my life been lived here.

The boy who hacks into the flesh of coconuts I never tasted, who reads time from the village clock in the square where I never played marbles with my cousins, who pedals through country roads raising dust that never raised me, who catches fireflies that I never chased, the neon green flashes that never dazzled my childhood here.

The son who slashes sugarcane I never harvested with my father, adores him as I never did for his careworn hands that never held mine, my hands around his waist riding his horse that I never rode to the dirt-floor home where I never grew up watching my mother stir pots of *arroz-con-pollo* in a kitchen where I never ate, and never listened to bedtime stories she never told me in a bed where I never dreamed.

(39–40)

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Part 1 of my first book of poetry, *City of a Hundred Fires*, chronicled my cultural coming-of-age set in Miami. As I completed Part I, I felt compelled to visit Cuba and continue exploring that story, or rather, to understand where that story began. And so, in 1994 I decided to *return* to the island for the first time; I say *return* because it indeed felt like I'd be returning to a place I had visited a thousand times through my imagination. And yet, I was somewhat apprehensive, fearing that the homeland I had imagined would prove to be indeed nothing more than a mirage and disappear the moment I arrived there. Well, at first, it *seemed* quite real—all the family photos, stories, and lore suddenly appeared, came to life in three-dimensional forms that I could fully experience. There it all was: the valley swales where my father swam as boy; the dirt road my mother walked every day to school; the mill still grinding sugarcane; the reservoir still full of resplendent sunshine. And there I was: a ghost of myself, of who I would've been had I been born and raised in Cuba, recognizing all of it. Or did I, really?

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The man who misses a life I never knew was mine to miss, claim as my own in Spanish, as *muy mío*: the conga beats of my tropical storms, ballad of my palmeras, balmy whispers of my Caribbean song. *Muy mío*: the iron-red soil of my flesh, sand of my white bones, pink hibiscus of my blood. *Muy mío*: the constellations I reconfigure into an astrology to read the past of who this half of me was, or never was. The future of who I will never be, or who will always be as an island within this island, *muy mío*.

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That first trip to Cuba, and many subsequent trips, filled in a lot of emotional and narrative gaps of my cultural storyline. And yet, the more familiar I became with the island, its people, and my family, the more I became estranged from all of these. Throughout the years, I began to sense that something was *amiss* about what I was *missing*; the Cuba I longed for was the Cuba of my parents and grandparents, which really didn't exist anymore. The homeland I craved was, after all, a mirage of borrowed memories. A permanent mirage I could still visit and pretend was real, but a mirage, nonetheless. Many years later, as I stood on the terrace of the U.S. Embassy in Havana, reading a poem I had written to commemorate its reopening, I would realize that much of my poetry was driven by a desire to help heal the collective pain of exile that I had inherited culturally and emotionally. Before then, however, I had to let go of Cuba for a while, and so I turned in the direction of my American mirage, again.

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For the blackbirds perched like commas on the telephone wire strung outside my kitchen window like a sentence scrawled in a language as

foreign to me as Hartford's granite mansions and grist mills, its white-washed steeples and snuffed-out smokestacks. All like another country to me, feeling my parents' exile as my own, thinking I deserved it for believing that to be an American meant betraying the mango and palm trees that raised me for the winter skeletons of the birches, as beautiful as they were lonely, as I was among them, barely surviving along the grey stretch of Grandview Avenue on my drive to the university to teach how poems sing and save.

(38)

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The exile from my exile—that's what I've termed the hiatus I took when I moved from the Cuban cultural bubble of Miami to Hartford to teach creative writing at Connecticut State in 1999. Because a *real* Cuba was an impossibility, I chose to reach for that *real* American mirage that had materialized from all those TV shows I had watched since childhood. As a working class family, we didn't vacation or travel very much; in fact, I had never been to New England. Consequently, I still genuinely thought (or at least hoped) that quintessential TV America really did exist. Of course, I soon realized that mirage was exactly that—a mirage—just like Cuba had proven to be. In her poem *One Art* Elizabeth Bishop writes: "I lost two cities, lovely ones" (Bishop 198). But I had lost *two countries, imaginary ones*. I was *countryless*, which made my first couple of years in Hartford one of the loneliest and most bewildering times of my life. I was experiencing all the painful loss of exile, yet without any country I could blame or hate for it, nor the hope of recovering any country that could heal and complete me. What to do? I turned to the mirage of wanderlust, thinking that perhaps there was another homeland yet to be discovered.

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For all the photos I've taken wandering, wanting to capture myself in-love with a country I could not simply live with, but could also die with. See me here: pocketing a stone from the Colosseum as a souvenir of how an empire or a life crumbles under the weight of its own excess. See me: out of breath atop Fuego volcano wanting to mix my blood with the earth's blood in its crater, simmering with Guatemala's revolutions. See me: inside the dungeon walls of the Palazzo Ducale carved with the last words of the condemned. Hear me: imagining, dreading the last poem I would ever carve.

Here I was: sinking with the mortal wealth of Venice's chandeliers and marble floors. Here I was: showered by a Brazilian waterfall in el Rio das Almas, River of Souls, flowing through the hillside resorts of Pirenópolis and the village women beating their wash against its rocks. Here I was: on the top floor of La Grande Arche de la Défense, overlooking the luminous anatomy of Paris, so beautiful it hurt like a lover I can never possess

and must abandon. Here I was, wherever I was: lost in always trying to find someplace, someone, something to belong to, yet always returning to myself. Here I am, again.

(Blanco 39)

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Not surprisingly, I found no homeland in any of my travels, but I did discover something more fundamental and satisfying. The quest for homeland is a universal, primordial, and fundamental driving force of the human condition. It appears thematically and historically in all our traditions of faith and our myths, our music and literature, our folklores and popular culture. Some obvious examples: the Garden of Eden and the promised land of milk and honey; Nirvana and Jannah; the legend of Avalon; James Hilton's Shangri-La and John Denver's song, *Take me Home, Country Roads*. I fathomed homeland as a figurative concept that imbues our lives in many respects, whether exile, immigrant, native, or migrant. It represents not a literal country, necessarily, but a figurative place of mind as well. For centuries, we have all been imaginary exiles longing to find a homeland in some regard—homeland being the metaphor that underlies our yearning to attain the unattainable mirage of wholeness, completeness, and perfection in every human endeavor, no matter what we do: doctor or mechanic, teacher or student, poet or plumber. And especially, we seek the homeland of love, which I encountered in Hartford when I met my present-day husband, Mark.

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What salvaged me was the man who found my eyes over a martini, held my hand down the trail at Talcott Mountain along the reservoir, listened with me to the ice sheets groaning and shifting like my life. The man I married for teaching me how to read William James, how to sauté shallots with filet mignon, how to make my first snow angel amid the frozen souls of the rose garden at Elizabeth Park.

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Mark and I have been together for over 20 years. Through him and with him, I found an emotional homeland that has granted me that safe space I'd been yearning for since I was a gay boy. And I trust he has found the same in me. We have found a virtual homeland in our supportive and grounding love for each other, against the backdrop of a society that historically has denied and alienated us, and still does to a degree. While I wouldn't consider our love to be a mirage, in general, love *is* quite mirage-like, constantly shifting and readjusting, altering and reimagining itself in response to changing needs and states of mind. The particular circumstances of my life's journey have provoked an interest in the connection between our need for love and our need for homeland, both complex

and essential human drives. In a sense, asking myself, *what is love?* is the same as asking *what is home?* These two desires run parallel, yet intersect each other; they contradict, yet complement each other in various fascinating ways for me. Consider that Mark is a blue-eyed *americano* who doesn't speak a word of Spanish and was raised in Sherrill, a postcard town in Upstate New York. We jokingly refer to our relationship as the gay sitcom version of Ricky and Lucy. I do admit that my attraction to him is partly because he represents the *other* to me, that *typical* American family from TV that I always wanted to be mine. What's more, he was an escape from the homophobic *machismo* of my Cuban culture. And conversely, I believe his attraction toward me is partly because I represent the *other* to him, and an escape from his more stoic Anglo-American culture. And yet, at times we feel a certain disappointment because we can't fully engage in each other's cultural lives. For example, he hates plantain soup and I hate hot dogs; he can't dance salsa and I can't ski; he can't communicate with my mother who barely speaks English, and I can't express myself in Spanish to his family. We sometimes feel alienated from each other's respective *homelands*, so to speak. And yet, that very alienation has prompted us to journey together and chase another mirage of *one* homeland that would belong to both of us, equally. We lived in Hartford, where we met; moved to Guatemala for a year; then to Washington DC; then back to my native Miami. We've vacationed in seven different Caribbean islands as well as Iceland with dreams of dropping out of society at large. Then we moved to Maine, believing nature was the ultimate, universal homeland for us.

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For the whole of me steeped in this dusk before the stars embroider the sky and the Milky Way's swatch appears above the back porch of my life in Maine. Needing to be nowhere and no one but this stillness: a drop of rain on my eave just before it swells and adjourns into the ground, a hummingbird paused at my buttercup, my honeysuckle vine before it inches another inch, my still pond just before the ripple from a frog's leap or a loose stone's fall, the content maple leaves before the October wind stirs and chills my hillside and my bones.

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Although I still treasure the hemlocks and birches that I'm blessed to be surrounded by, after having lived ten years in Bethel, Maine, I've come to recognize that my idealization of nature has also been somewhat of a naïve mirage of homeland. As I've witnessed from watching the foxes and the hummingbirds, the peonies and the ragweed, nature is as cruel as it is kind, as treacherous as it is beautiful, as unforgiving as it is forgiving. I've come to believe that in a sense the inception of homeland was—and continues to be—an attempt to separate and differentiate ourselves from the precarious instability and uncontrollable whims of nature. In

other words, we've been driven by a need to create neat and definable parameters of who we are, defined by where we come from, to determine where we are going, and who we can or cannot be. But I would say that through the centuries it has been more and more difficult to maintain those parameters. In our contemporary world, that delineation has become harder than ever, given the interdependence of global economies, modes of transportation, social media networks, and 24-hours newsreels. That connectedness is writing an organic narrative of homogenous oneness, which can feel like a threat to individuality. I think that fear has resulted in the support of isolationist narratives represented by Trump, Brexit, Brazilian president Bolsonaro, and the like. Nevertheless, I believe we are living through the very beginnings of the death of the nation-state and of homeland in the traditional sense. We are (I hope) slowly but surely becoming one people from nowhere and everywhere. All of us natives, yet exiles in one way or another, with only one true homeland: the one we find inside ourselves, which is not a mirage. Or is it?

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For now: the fixed geometry of the White Mountains that needn't move or heed a thing, drawn across my window, for now: a spider patient at the center of its web spun across my doorway, for now: my peonies satisfied with the beautiful weight of their immense blooms, for now: my ferns like flags that unfurl, wither, and unfurl again, loyal to the same ground. For now: my wandersong the carol of robins perched in my pear tree, my soul the wisps of these clouds tendering the watercolor sunset. For now: I am citizen of these dimming skies, in the country of my body, homeland to myself—for just a moment.

(42)

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