

Almonds are members of the peach family.

Stephanie Sauer



an exhibition

Touch has a memory. O say, love, say,
What can I do to kill it and be free

-JOHN KEATS





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CAMISOLE
FRONT A C D

18

SKIRT
FRONT
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He set it up so we had to get married in the church which I didn't know about I walked out of the church I never finished the service He pulled me up the step I said Bob I don't even like you I don't wanna get married I never had anything to do with him for three or four days but then he'd go out and drink and beat the crap outta you so he started right off the bat but I wouldn't go home because my mother hurt me so bad





finally I took a test
and passed so high

I couldn't believe it
'cause he kept telling
me stupid I was how

stupid I was and every-
thing and I went to work

and was made supervisor in
a year I would've been second

high but he went and
busted my door/paired

said he's
gonna
pout



sugar in my
gms. tank

a performance

CAST:

BILLIEMAË'S BABY
SCIENTIFIC NARRATOR

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ACT I

[*Song plays: The (Almost) Ballad of Billiemae Alice.*
BILLIEMAË'S BABY *sits on stage in front of a quilting
hoops and silently stitches by hand throughout the entire
duration of the song.*]

ACT II

[BILLIEMAËS BABY *stands, directs attention to audience.*]

BILLIEMAËS BABY: She took the child's beating heart in her warm hands and held it until it softened, until it knew it was safe to open. She sang stories so it would remember things it had never felt. She lulled its redness with her touch. When the heart opened she poured in all her love and all her fears with it. She poured in all her dreaming and her bruises. She touched its tissues to her swollen lips and wept. The heart grew bigger with her tears. The heart grew tender, skittish to the touch. She set a kettle on the stove and stirred in possibility, measuring out worries in her palm before sprinkling them in. She ladled the brine into a bowl and served it with oyster crackers. She spread the heart with a butter knife on toast and told the child to eat, to help herself to more.

Grandma, tell me about the good ol' days. Two chipped teeth and 137 bruises, four children, three miscarriages, lost the second after being socked in the stomach, surgery, chronic blood clots, watched your eldest child beaten, once, doors nailed shut, lost the promotion, sugar in the gas tank, rape.

Grandpa, tell me about the greatest generation. How you *had nothin'*. How when you got back from the war, the Navy dropped you off in Nevada City and you had to walk all the way to the ranch because there was no phone then – 20 miles of river grade. How when you got there, your own dog didn't even recognize you. How this broke you in places wartime didn't touch.

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A friend asks: “Where is my purple heart? My father got one in Vietnam, but what about the rest of us who still have to fight the war he brought back home?”

I know I'm going to die, I just wish I'd get it over with sooner, he told his mother. Or at least that's what grandma told me. His body had been withering ever since he was three. Ever since we played marbles and he let me win at Clue, Monopoly. The nerves, they said, had no more padding. Thirty years without a doctor's visit, driving a nine-shift, logging below the summit. Fifty years since the stroke at three. They had said it was encephalitis to cover up the beatings he witnessed. Just huddled his little boy body into a corner and screamed. Fifty years and now he slips, bleeds from the skull all over the carpets. When I am not there. When my aunt is out of town. When he doesn't listen to the recommendations, wants it to end. He frightens me. A body without the command of a human, its uncertainty, the possibility of spasm, buckled joints that stall out at the intersection. Or worse, at that freeway crossing near Bloomfield. But he made it—thirty years of hauling log to sit on a couch by a wood burning stove in a modular home and wait to die.

My nephew is born 12:55 on a Sunday to a local sheriff who tells me that the most common calls in our hometown are to report domestic abuse and suicide.

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The Veterans Affairs Hospital postpones treatment for grandpa's cancer complications caused from exposure to the Bikini Island atomic bomb testing while he served in the US Navy. His contemporaries are dying off as the VA cancels appointments, puts off treatments, testing. What happens when we don't look too closely at these effects of war, at our own histories? At what it does to a body, to a life, to the bodies and lives of our babies.

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Once I dreamed I had a studio in an antique shop set up inside an ancient gothic cathedral in Brazil. One night I left, then come back after closing to track down and disappear a ghost that haunted the place, that was after my beloved. It threatened my family.

There are no monsters here, only ghosts.

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[SCIENTIFIC NARRATOR *speaks in a loud, authoritative voice from offstage, or as disembodied voice-over. As SCIENTIFIC NARRATOR speaks, BILLIEMA'S BABY removes outer layer of clothing onstage.*]

SCIENTIFIC NARRATOR: In an article entitled “Trait vs. Fate” in the May 2013 issue of *Discovery*, Dan Hurley discusses the epigenetic programming research of Moske Szyf and Michael Meaney, saying:

According to the new insights of behavioral epigenetics, traumatic experiences in our past, or in our recent ancestors' past, leave molecular scars adhering to our DNA...our experiences, and those of our forebears, are never gone, even if they have been forgotten. They become a part of us, a molecular

residue holding fast to our genetic scaffolding. The DNA remains the same, but psychological and behavioral tendencies are inherited. You might have inherited not just your grandmother's knobby knees, but also her predisposition toward depression caused by the neglect she suffered as a newborn...like grandmother's vintage dress, you could wear it or have it altered. The genome has long been known as the blueprint for life, but the epigenome is life's Etch A Sketch: shake it hard enough, and you can wipe clean the family curse.

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[BILLIEMAË'S BABY *remains standing to address audience in 1940s-era slip.*]

Billiema's Baby:

The inner lining
of the cups of the first bra
I bought myself
with the first paycheck
from my first job
with the college degree
that was the first in my family
are stained
from weeping.

My breasts are weeping.

This is not poetry.
Weeping is the medical term
for the seepage that occurs
from a hereditary eczema
enflamed by an acute emotional distress
which may or may not also be hereditary.

The weeping does not cause the staining.
The broken tissues of my areoles leak a clear fluid.
The comfrey root I boil in water,
make into a salve is what leaves traces.

[As SCIENTIFIC NARRATOR *speaks*, BILLIEMAËS
BABY *pulls new skirt on over her head, then new shirt.*
Tucks shirt into skirt.]

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SCIENTIFIC NARRATOR: In 1973, The National Geographic Society conducted an anthropological survey of American Mountain People and concluded that:

...bonds of community have generally been strong and those of family stronger still. Clan solidarity, and the tendency to feelings to be intense when concentrated on relatively few other people, gave rise to the notorious mountain feuds...But it was not because the participants were what we would normally consider murderers, not that they were antisocial, but rather that human bonds counted so much with them – and that they were fiercely independent, impulsive, and fearless.

[BILLIEMAË'S BABY *remains standing to address audience.*]

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Billiemae's Baby: We come into this world through the bodies of other humans, their blood ours. As of yet there is no way to escape this vulnerability. These bodies require that we move into our pain, birth ourselves through its tangle of blood and seepage. Too often we insist only on birthing forward our pain into other humans to escape the tearing open of our own hearts.

In the hills we protect those kinfolk who gouge the deepest holes. We defend them because we know their pain as our own. Some call this compassion, but it is not always compassion. Not all forgiveness works this way. No matter the why, we are left to the consequences. After a hundred years of global wars, centuries of human and cultural genocides, epochs of post-agricultural poverty, we are left to the mending. In

the tradition of Westerns, this would read: there is no more no more frontier. There is no more cowboy riding away. There is no away to ride to. We can colonize space, sure, but that is only the repetition of an outworn model. Perhaps all that is left is to sit down in front of the fire and grab a needle, sterilize it in the flame. Own up to ourselves, to each other. Start threading ourselves back together, one suture at a time, finding a way beyond the fragments.

I unzip the nightmare. I lay it down in the gutter off the dirt road in Paraty. I lay it down in holes poked in linen, stitch after stitch. I lay it down, the weight of it, move it out of me – if there can be such a thing. We are composed of flesh and language that comes from the flesh and language of others. There is no syntax native to humans.

It is a stitch, a repeated stitch, a dance, a song, a picking, a de-shelling of nuts, the processing of a deer, the chopping of cabbage, of chiles, a sifting through the beans, a hanging of the laundry, scrubbing the floors and washing the dishes only to wash them again. The hands at work wring out the blood. I haul up bones from the river and sit, listen to the screaming left in them. I hold up each bone to the light, wipe it clean of debris, realign it back into its skeletal form. I burn each bone to heavy ash to make an ink that can write, draw new stories. Only then will I put down my pen and sing off-key.

a patchwork



Someday I will learn this language.

[STUDIO NOTE: SEPTEMBER 2012, RIO DE JANEIRO]

Making takes form. It devours the form. I am drawn to new mediums. I take up stitching (again). I collect fabrics, threads, 25¢ quilting manuals from the thrift store down the hill. I gather. I take sudden notice of tapestries, of tapestries and handmade patterns. I think large scale about domesticity, craft and economies changing. I link these to histories of bodies: male, female, between, country, urban. Shifts brought about by activism. I practice. I sew gifts for friends. For myself. I thread the machine from memory. I forget how to thread a bobbin, how to insert it back into place. Remembering takes half an hour. I sew pieces into patterns for the sheer fun of it, and to remember. My body fills with longing. Sadness dampens the room, causes dew. I sit down and I write. I write through. I write between stitches, between acts of making. I have to reshape outworn narratives. I have to write into myself new stories. Then the sewing, the making can continue.

[STUDIO NOTE: JULY 2012, RIO DE JANEIRO]

A dog begging outside a bar. Tea on the rooftop in a lawn chair. I try to read there in the sun a spell. I eat a package of Biscoito Globo leftover from the bookstore event we hosted over the weekend. I think of the Candelária I passed early this morning on the bus, consider what happened there: eight homeless children rounded up and shot by police, left for dead on a night in 1993. I wrap books for online purchase orders. I worry. I teach myself again how to appliqué. I unpack my studio. I read. I shoo pigeons on the rooftop. I talk to a theatre-maker about a theatre she is making while on my way to the bathroom. I think about the photograph of my mother's tumor-infected uterus that is now removed from her body. At lunch I see the factory's contractor and the porter in the place I can buy a plate of chicken, okra and beans for two dollars if I don't add rice. I walk to the post office at the bus depot, since the other was just shut down after its workers were held up twice at machine gunpoint. I call my girl to ask for a zip code. I do not carry a smart phone. I wonder what will come of us. I want to keep sewing things, appliquéing things until life is whole again.

[STUDIO NOTE: SEPTEMBER 2012, RIO DE JANEIRO]

In Brazil, all this textile, *costura*, embroidery in the streets and fairs and galleries brings me home.

Patchwork onto muslin backing, whip stitch down. Attach back fabric at 2.5" larger (1.5"/side); turn edges in and self-bind. Trim filling to .25" smaller on all sides.

they sent word back to relatives." Like all good hillsmen, Jimmy has a lively sense of the past, for the hills speak powerfully of continuity. He recalls nostalgically

[STUDIO NOTE: 18 SETEMBRO 2012, RIO DE JANEIRO]

Why has my story not changed again? I have been overrun by phantom sightings. I look out into this city and feel only what has happened here, though I do not know the details. I see only pain and aching. The center of this city breathes in, expels memories that go undocumented in the books on Rio's splendor for sale in the stalls lining the mouth of the metro. Tour guides note history in framed boxes set off to the side of the main text. This history adds exoticism, humor, intrigue. It adds value in the market. I live in a postcard of carnival, beaches. I was born in a postcard sent from the set of a Spaghetti Western. I felt its holocaust before I ever knew its narrative. I have collected postcards of other places in this world only to compare them to the sound of their stonework. The romance has worn itself thin and left only bare patches for the past to rush in. Once we see the horror of a becoming, can we ever see anything else? This has nothing to do with will or deciding to see the good. Places leech their memories whether or not we want to listen.

Eat. Pray. Love. tops the bestseller lists in Brazil.

[STUDIO NOTE: 5 MAY 2013, RIO DE JANEIRO]

Finished embroidering the first kerchief yesterday. Have yet to start the next one. This project difficult, dangerous. I still want to give it up at moments, but I can already notice myself becoming somewhat scientific about the words of my grandmother. I can talk about them, expose them, detach them from my own voice for a change.

I have not left the house in days.

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The backside of my stitching is not neat and tidy like examples I've seen, like those I learned from. I am not worried about being messy, following patterns. This, freeing.

The slow, slow stitching of this particular text: expelling voices. First, living with and examining them.

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I have not sought release forms to record or publish my grandmother's stories. I carry them in me, whether or not I want to. They resist the restrictions of copyright law. Her story is part of my story, but it is not my story. The tearing away requires vigilance, a seam ripper and stumbling.

“Just imagine what she could have done if she had a little support,” an uncle laments. He swears I have inherited her fight. I find it hard to live without battling. I have no idea, really, what a life without fight would look like, and sometimes I think I keep my demons close because fighting them is all I know. Slowly, slowly, I let go and make up the life I want to be living. I invent. This is another kind of fight, battling off the world outside to keep myself wild, to keep the making alive. But at least it is a different fight. Sometimes.

2012, RIO DE JANEIRO: Cross the street to the pharmacy. The PM are outside yielding assault rifles, occupying the entrance to the favela down that same street. Rio has just secured their bid for the 2016 Olympics. I notice my visceral response to assault rifles on men in uniform is different from other passers by. I notice myself as foreign in this instance, a product of the libertarian and radical left hills of Northern California, that my response is rage, terror. Milling around me are faces that convey *we are used to this*. I mask my response. I enter the pharmacy, buy toilet paper, toothpaste. Commerce drones on down the street: *um suco de abacaxi e um pão de queijo, por favor*.


2013, RIO DE JANEIRO: Apathy in a year's time has turned to outrage, action, political mobilization. Protests one million strong all across the country. Solidarity in a global network of anonymous sites, authors. There is deep fear in the daily proof that life here is not valued. But there has been enough. *Basta já!* There are reverberations of Brazil's past revolutions, of the Arab Spring, of Occupy. There is no face, only movement.

2013, SÃO PAULO: The yearly artist publications fair. Makers are enflamed. The medium itself again becomes an active dimension, full of nuance and risk. R staffs our table while I hop from press to press examining new work, swapping samples and talking shop. I return to staff our table while she does the same. We have become part of a traveling band of independent publishers in a place where independent publishing was long illegal. Until the mid-1800s, even printing in the colonies was forbade; all published materials had to be imported from the Portuguese crown. Brazil was the last country in the Americas to acquire a printing press (Mexico was the first), let alone to legalize publishing. This is part of the reason we've found it hard to buy paper or print books locally: there is not a strong tradition of papermaking or printing, and by extension, a limited number of well-trained printers. There are letterpress printers from the Cordel tradition, but not much by way of commercial printing. Our small press had to limit a recent edition to 750 copies because that was the maximum quantity of paper we could find in all of the country. For another book, we found it more cost effective to print and bind in Belgium, after finding that even printers in the southern part of Brazil were unequipped to

even make the metallic impressions on book cloth we needed. We do our best to keep production local, but the crippling costs of operating a small business in Rio make this a challenge. Here today at the Casa do Povo (People's House) we form a blend of small presses, fine art presses, self-publishers, poster makers, book artists, artist-instructors, cartoonists, poets, zine makers. Many print with the aid of salvaged technologies that allow hands to touch ink: letterpress, risograph, Xerox, silkscreen. The immediacy and resilience of our mediums is especially resonant now. Again.

[STUDIO NOTE: JUNE 2013, RIO DE JANEIRO]

Have had to distance from this work. Much. To heal my own flesh outside this heaviness, this hurt. All this bruised little girl flesh. And most of it's not even mine.



hell They knew when he walked thro
I chose around He'd go in and
back he hated cowboy boots there

ould say one word to him F you
was sick He wouldn't even learn
ave to pay 'cause I'm payin



“People who have survived atrocities....witnesses as well as victims are subject to the dialectic of trauma. It is difficult for an observer to remain clearheaded and calm, to see more than a few fragments of the picture at one time, to retain all the pieces and to fit them together. It is even more difficult to find a language that conveys fully and persuasively what one has seen.”

-JUDITH HERMAN, M.D., *Trauma and Recovery*

I give my head to clear thinking
My heart to greater loyalty
My hands to larger service
For my club, my community, my country, and my world.

-4-H PLEDGE

2001, St. Louis University: I made it to college. My freshman year I read Alice Walker's recollection of three gifts her mother gave her when she left home and went off to study. I only remember one gift – a sewing machine – and the rationale for it: that it was the one tool she could use to make anything she needed so she wouldn't have to depend on anyone else. It stuck with me, the image of that sewing machine being part of feminist theory in an academia in which I felt so alien. I spent a day and a night in that basement apartment scrubbing the tile walls of their years layered in oil spatters, and in those hours, instead of a familiar shame, I felt proud of my mothers, grandmothers. Of the practical skills they had gifted me. All they could give.

[STUDIO NOTE: AUGUST 2013, RIO DE JANEIRO]

Ironing this old plaid Levi shirt smells of home. Of my trucker uncle. Of grandma in curlers by the fireside ironing dad's work clothes after his divorce. Saying *he does so much for us girls*.

Working with men who try to talk down to me to hide their own doubt. The difference is that now I can articulate this and I put it back on them. Some days being a woman burns the body inside.

Inside the studio voices invade, cast doubt. My mother's voice about how my sewing technique is not flawless. That I cannot pull off this mess now that there are large fragments that need piecing together. That I do not have the skills to do it. That my quilting skills ruptured when our thread broke. I wet the tip, rethread my needle, teach myself.

[STUDIO NOTE: 10 MARCH 2014, SACRAMENTO]

Cannot shake this anger at the tearing down of things I've made. The lives.

In Tove Jansson's biography, Boel Westin claims the original Moomins were dark, ghostly, scary creatures that haunted things. Conceived in family homes, conceptualized further during war. Reading this fact makes me light with relief.

Began appliquéing in scraps of fabric from the unfinished quilt I

started at thirteen with my mother. Found a box of them in an old shed behind grandma's. Had to clean rat shit off the outside, but the contents were good. This need to stitch that brokenness, all the brokenness into this quilt, let it be alchemical. Real. Give it life, not just detritus.

I know I cannot be the first woman to turn to quilting as suture. I stop in at a used bookstore to research, find these words in Dr. Gladys-Marie Fy's Preface to *Stitched from the Soul: Salve Quilts from the Ante-Bellum South*.

of the stitching pattern; the relative length and evenness reflect a certain amount of inner harmony. Deviations from this pattern might well indicate that the quilt maker was nursing physical and emotional wounds. Color preferences and abrupt changes in design might also serve as indicators of general well-being.

Additional physical clues might be stains from tears or blood. All of these clues help us trace the life cycles of individual slave women, as well as chart their experiences and the knowledge they gained along the way.

In a sense, the stitches, the tears, and the blood are "time markers" of the everyday events in their lives: marriages, births of children, illnesses, separation of family members by sale or death, whippings, punishment, deprivation, and so forth.

Denied the opportunity to read or write, slave women quilted their diaries, creating permanent but unwritten records of events large and small, of pain and loss, of triumph and tragedy in their lives. And each piece of cloth became the focal point of a remembered past.

I buy the book. I underline, highlight, and circle passages. I write notes in pencil in the margins about quilting bees being a type of consciousness-raising circle. I write questions, too. I start searching. I find a kind of kinship in the reprinted patterns, their textures and staining. Until reading Fry's words, I had never intellectualized quiltmaking. I have only made them. I've studied the prosody at work in "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers," but never the stitching itself. My hand at the needle was like the hand that stopped drawing long ago only to begin again awkwardly as an adult. I could not think; it was all tied up in motion and bleeding. I had to take a lesson from Lynda Barry. I had to just make holes, bind layers, rip seams back out. Start over. See perfection in the lack of it.

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Education, I found, has less to do with knowing things and more to do with crafting oneself.

The unhealthy tendency of disembodied words on a page.

1992, NEVADA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA: Grandma dresses me in button-down shirts, pressed with starch, dried by the fireside. She talks me through the binding of a tie, pointed at the end like my father's, knotted perfect. Don't you never kiss no man's foot.

[STUDIO NOTE: NOVEMBER 2013, RIO DE JANEIRO]

I envision burning this quilt in a field as a creative act, the act of destruction. To make a silence. By choice and in healing, not by shame. A friend says, "don't do it." But sometimes the most real part of making work is being able to unthread, to kill your darlings, to burn what no longer needs becoming. But perhaps, in this case, it is just the part of me that wants to banish pain.

Since age five there has been one constant: transit. Joint custody, foreign exchange, weekly commutes, living overseas. I left the home I knew because there were no other options for a girl who picked up the scent of rotting bodies buried in the women around her, who saw despair seething out tiny pores and ragged cuticles, the bloodied carnage piled high from generations before her, around her, closing in. Wasted. All this utterly wasted human capacity and the lethal rage it breeds. The biting perfectionism of the frustrated woman. The broken women who break babies the way they break mustangs. At twelve, I signed a pact in blood with mama swearing I would not marry or have babies. It was a pact with myself to remain human. (A child knows more than any of us care to see.) At the first chance: a high school exchange program in Colima, Mexico. Free, except for airfare. Only two students per semester in a school of three thousand. I applied. Anywhere. Anywhere else. I saved money for the ticket. I was sixteen. Because the violence of gendering was not taken seriously, I could not call myself a refugee. I could only say: Mexico, New Mexico, Arizona, Madrid, Sacramento, Chicago, New York, Brasília, Rio. I could only say: I was privileged. I could only say: I was lucky enough to get away.

Embroidery has always been a deservedly popular hobby. It stimulates the imagination and at the same time provides an island of calm in the midst of a hurly-burly world.

Emergency Shelters - Chicago

Greenhouse Shelter - 773-278-4110

Apna Ghar - 773-334-4663

Family Rescue - 773-375-8400

House of the Good Shepherd - 773-955-8434

Neighborhood Lighthouse - 773-638-0227

My friends and I joked in high school that the street on which our grandparents lived should be renamed Wife Beater Lane and not for the cotton apparel. It was the first suburb in town and nearly every post-War home hid a violent story that had been stricken from the Greatest Generation documentary scripts airing on The History Channel. Now that same street, like so many suburban streets in California, is home to meth labs and hydroponic pot farms. The police are called out for a different kind of danger, a danger seen as real.

My grandpa is a legend, I hear at the local diner, taking unnecessary risks with his life and his scrappy equipment to haul log in the Sierras and keep his business afloat.

My grandpa is a legend, I hear.

2006, NEVADA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA: In grandpa's blue Jimmy, we ride through the rust-colored mud of what used to be his property in what used to be the mining town of Sweetland in what used to be unnamed before the miners came. He now runs the water truck and is paid to keep the place up. With my grandfather—a lifetime Elks Lodge member who has logged these hills since before my father was born—I am creating an art piece. My grandfather, who is against art and education and educated women creating art, is helping me. He son-of-a-bitches the radio when they play Willie Nelson. I love Willie and my friends and I have joked that we would bed him given the chance, but I do not tell my grandfather this. We pull up to the padlocked fence and find a NO TRESSPASSING sign he posted in the seventies with five bullet holes rusted through it. He jumps out and, with a crowbar from the toolbox that is bolted in the flatbed, he pries it loose, leaving the nails fall around the tree's base. He is leaving traces because he loves finding them himself—old Union coins, arrowheads—and hopes that someday someone will find his.

The sign, strung with the barbed wire my uncle cut from his pasture fence, is hanging in an exhibition today. Over the faded lettering another artist has sketched a naked human and oak tress and I have written a poem comprised of two stanzas and images referencing Malakoff Diggins and not-so-hippie love. My grandfather will travel to Sacramento, he tells me, to see this piece. To see what I have done with the Kenworth mud flap we hauled in from the shop. He will drive the hour and pay too much for parking and walk with his bad knee into Luna's Café where he will have to ask my grandmother what a *lee-quab-doe* is and she will have to read the menu carefully. He will see this because I have found I can take my eyes and turn them homeward. This has something to do with Chicanismo, I think.

2010, NEVADA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA: If you trace the county lines, ink will outline the shape of a pistol. Teachers at the Catholic middle school and public high school taught this, proud of the coincidence or finding it funny. It's a shape local organizations use to advertise on tote bags and bumper stickers. College professors taught California Gold Country as the site of the most violent chapter in Native American history.

At the Rough and Ready Succession Days celebration, grandma orders hot dogs for grandpa, me and herself. We sit at a picnic table in front of the VFD and talk to a woman in a handmade bonnet and an old man in plaid. They come every year, she tells grandma, who fills conversations lulls like she's packing cement. The couple narrates the lineup of events, says that the hanging will start soon. And sure as shit, a scarecrow of a citified Easterner is hoisted up on a rope and left to dangle in the dry summer wind above whoops and hollers. Grandma daintily nibbles at her hot dog, but polishes off a bag of potato chips and orders dessert *for the two of us to share*. Grandpa stares at the rope. He stares off a lot now. We are told to call it Dementia.

I don't have the right to forget certain things. I think it's a luxury of our time that should be pressed hard against.

-DARIO ROBLETO

“Trauma’s impact comes partly from social factors, such as its influence on how parents interact with their children. But stress also leaves ‘epigenetic marks’ – chemical changes that affect how DNA is expressed without altering its sequence. A study published this week in Nature Neuroscience finds that stress in early life alters the production of small RNAs, called microRNAs, in the sperm of mice. The mice show depressive behaviors that persist in their progeny, which also show glitches in metabolism.”

-VIRGINIA HUGHES, “SPERM RNA CARRIES MARKS OF TRAUMA”

NATURE: INTERNATIONAL WEEKLY JOURNAL OF SCIENCE, 14 APRIL 2014

When she was first married, Grandma worked as a nurse in the Department of Mental Hygiene at DeWitt State Hospital. A former Army base, DeWitt housed overflow patients from other California mental hospitals beginning in 1946. By 1960 it housed over 2800 patients. Grandma was paid an hourly wage to administer pills, bathe patients, scrub hallways. She tells me there was a separate ward for lesbians, where she worked for a time. She tells me she had gone to school with several women who were admitted by their husbands when their husbands wanted to remarry. She tells me a lot of women were admitted by their husbands when their husbands wanted to remarry. She tells me there was nothing wrong with these women. She tells me she was almost fired for combing a patient's hair and giving her water. She tells me she was not supposed to touch the crazies. I am also told I cannot trust anything my grandmother says.

‘Contained craziness’ is the quilting term used to describe a hodge-podge of pieces stitched together into squares that are then stitched into a larger quilt. Contained craziness seems to be the way handicrafts aim to tame, a pre-determined pattern into which we may filter our wild parts, our worries, questions, pain. The women I come from stitch theirs, boil theirs, cut theirs, cover theirs with dirt and watch, wait for something else to take shape – a shape that has been chosen ahead of time and is anticipated with care. A choice to repeat the past like a refrain in a hymnal, sometimes inspired, sometimes dutiful. A choice to bring the past into their living by not altering its shape or by altering it slightly. This slightness over time allows for a particular continuity, for safety. You always know your position, the extent to which you are needed inside of a unit, hands full of tradition, fingers calloused.

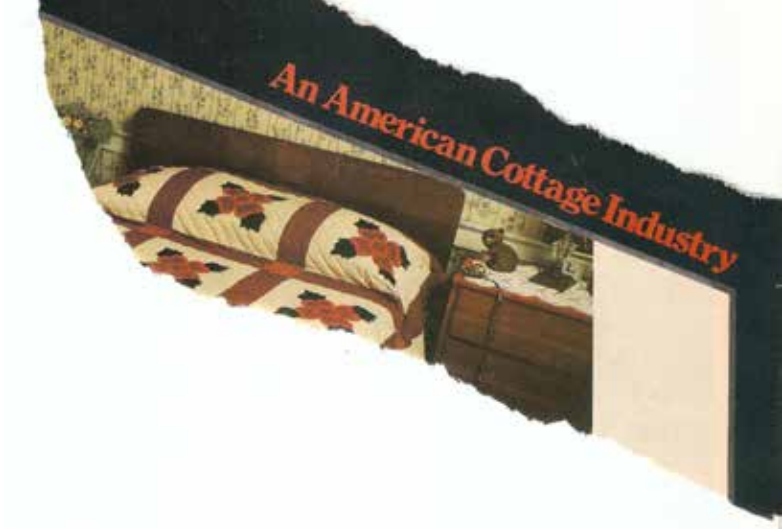
It is family shorthand to call grandma crazy. The screaming, the secrets, the lies, the sneaking of sweet things into hidden places all over the house, into her mouth. The cussing at and blaming of grandpa for everything. The out-of-breath retellings of the past over and over and over again. Every sentence in a

conversation turning to a memory. Her never leaving the house. No one can listen to her for more than an hour or her toxicity begins to infect. Some claim she's made the whole abuse thing up, convinced herself she's the victim when really it's the other way around. They blame her for not leaving, say she slept around. Grandpa can't see why she can't just let the past go. Some worry about him, call what she does now elder abuse. We see him shrinking. We see her growing large. She considers herself strong now, says she doesn't take no more shit. The rest of us wish there'd have been a divorce long ago, but it's too late now. Now, grandma is crazy because calling her this is easier on us. Pinning it on the woman excuses our own complicity in the normalizing of her pain.

The best of the old ways, I told myself, do not die, and especially in the mountains, where people seem to have an extra measure of appreciation for the past. Perhaps this is true in a particular way in the Far West, settled much later than the Appalachians, and the Ozarks. Many western families are only one or two generations removed from the region's first pioneers.

In much of the western mountain country the opportunists have come and gone, taking the wealth of furs, minerals, and timber with them. It is the patient people who remain; steady and independent, they seem to care little for wealth, and see no lasting gain in the pace that exploitation demands. They do

917.3 National Geographic
Nat Society
c.1 American mountain
people



Don't never let nobody call you Okie. Until college I spelled it "Oakie" and thought my grandma's advice had something to do with my parents being cabinet makers.

[STUDIO NOTE: SETEMBRO 2013, RIO DE JANEIRO]

Being around these city girls from São Paulo and Rio remind me I'm rough around the edges. They come so polished, so clean at the brim. Generations and generations of preening make me feel fresh off the farm, embarrassed of the straw still stuck between my teeth. A bumpkin. Especially in this world of *high art*.

People come into the installation and ask me if this is a sewing atelier, if I make bedspreads to sell, if I'm a seamstress, and if I teach quilting workshops. And it still strikes a nerve that using a historically feminine medium still automatically deems this piece *craft* and not *art*. I am suspect of those distinctions, but still irate at this continuous treatment of my work as something not to be considered more carefully because it is aligned with female traditions of making. Still.

A retired seamstress visits. She stands for several long minutes in front of the quilt, inspecting, reading. She asks me to talk about the piece. I talk of the impact of all we inherit, the stories, the memories of bruised flesh and broken lives, the love, the skills, the scarring. She nods in consideration. She thanks me for this work. She says it is "important." Then she leaves.

She comes back an hour later with her mother.

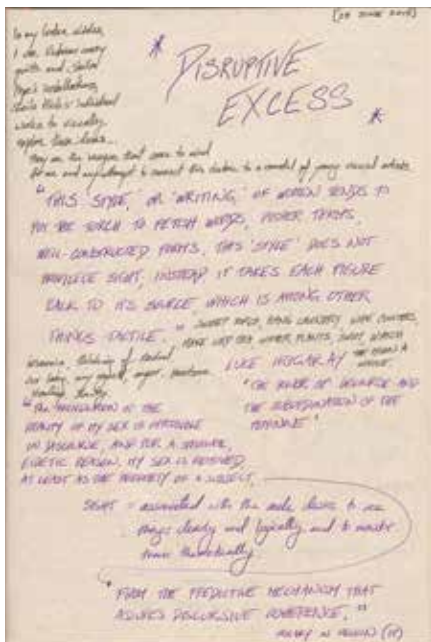
[STUDIO NOTE: SETEMBRO 2013, RIO DE JANEIRO]

I grew fascinated with language because language was the thing used to contain me, to beat me down into smaller and smaller pieces so that I would be easier for my family and my culture to stomach. They were busy. They didn't have space for the room I needed. So I studied the words, the syntaxes. I kept a spiral notebook where I composed rhyming poems, copied down strings of letters I didn't understand and looked up their definitions. I made lists from a thesaurus of words to use in future rhyming poems. I turned to paper when punished for speaking. Dish soap and thumbs down my throat, the larynx closes. Be seen, not heard. Be accommodating and sweet. I was told terrible stories about myself, explanations for why I was so strange, so troublesome and mean. I became a bully who was bullied. I had no other way to say things. Bad words were off-limits but bad words turn toxic when kept inside a body. They eat away at the esophagus if not expelled. The difference between Brazilians and United Statesians, it seems, has something to do with the way words are held and released.

It is strange to use text in this quilt – that is, to employ written language in a tradition developed mostly by silenced ones: the wife, the slave, the woman. But this is my reality now: writing. The privilege of my education. This is my contribution to the tradition,

then. An expansion, not a breaking.

Bringing quilting into writing, integrating it: the only way this work is real. For it to exist only as Roman script on white paper would be a false making. Sterilized.



Something nice. Something that would make me fit in at the private school for which her brother struggled to pay tuition. Something that would keep the kids there from calling me *trash*. But I loved that jacket. I loved the world it made, the one I could disappear into on the playground.

It is this magic I need to keep. It is palpable, this magic. It has a taste.

[STUDIO NOTE: APRIL 2014, CALIFORNIA]

I begin sewing a welcoming quilt for my new nephew from scraps of worn-in family clothing. I am pulled to make him something to touch, to hold over his body when it feels fragile or alone or wounded in the world, something to remind him he is loved. Sometimes we must make a thing only for the sheer love of the person receiving it.

The making of his quilt takes months away from my studio practice, places me in the bedroom with a fold-up table, sewing machine, chair. I love this making. It returns me. But I cannot help but feel haunted by this notion that turning my making toward a loved one minimizes my work, places me back in the world of country crafts and women's work. Quilts, scrapbooks, embroidery. I have swallowed the myth of Modernist (also say: Renaissance, Romantic, Realist) male genius despite my gagging on it. It poisons even my love of other ways of making, insisting that I am less of an artist because I care for those around me, because I still hold the capacity to hold them close. I refuse this. I see all around me a world of makers, most of them women, equally adept at committing to their own making as they are at valuing and elevating those around them. I slash open a vein to drain the poison. I suck out the altered blood and spit mouthfuls on the ground. I cauterize the breakage, begin interviewing makers who also make spaces for others. I make plans to publish a series of these interviews, then a book.

In their most active years, members of the Royal Chicano Air Force arts collective did not distinguish between those who secured the grants, organized the events, repaired the engines and those to composed the artwork. This act of denying divisions was a conscious subversion of Eurocentric frameworks of art

and culture. In the tellings and retellings of their story, however, this ideology is downplayed and the more conventional story of the RCAF as a core group of visual artists becomes History.

How does one convey a different narrative to a reader unwilling to ready any other way than the one they already know? How does a maker make space when what they make is read in a language foreign to their composition? When not only words, but the syntax doesn't fit?

[STUDIO NOTE: FEBRUARY 2015, CALIFORNIA]

Songs come into my body as I stitch my nephew's quilt. They pound their way up from abdomen, spill out my lips before I notice what has happened. Before I can silence the noise if there is someone nearby. The impulse to silence is not mine; but it functions before I hear it. I get back to it. I have to stitch another space for song to reemerge.

Arthur Bispo do Rosário stitched for himself from the threads of blankets and blue uniforms he wore as a patient at the Colônia Juliano Moreira what he called the Manto da Apresentação, the Afro-Brazilian mantle in which he would present himself to his Creator on the Final Judgment Day. He embroidered into the cover of this mantle words that came to him on the underside, names of those he “would save and take to the new world.” He spent his lifetime stitching this piece of textile that would serve, for him, a much higher purpose upon death. He meant to wear this piece upon his translation to the next world, a devotedly embroidered mantle in which to present himself to his God.

But Bispo do Rosário was not buried in his mantle. His mantle hangs instead in museums, at the São Paulo Bienale. His mantle is now Art, extracted from the sacred purpose he had imbued into it. Bispo do Rosário had no say in this matter. Bispo do Rosário was *crazy*.

Bispo do Rosário is now hailed as one of the most important artists and visionaries of the 20th Century. Today, the Colônia Juliano Moreira serves as a kind of museum dedicated to his

life and work, as well as those of other patients. It has become a museum-as-gesture-of-apology-and-maybe-even-healing for an era of psychiatric internment taken up with vigor by a post-colonial country readily embracing the colonizing continent's medical practices of the day. (Watch this happen all across the Americas.) I imagine the writer Machado de Assis laughing at this irony from what may or may not be his grave. Back in 1882, he poked holes in this "scientific" European fascination with pathologizing the messy things that make us human. Especially when these pathologies were directed at the poor and black and female. I wonder if he'd be surprised to see how little this exile by madness proves the artist (person) is real story has changed in its marketing strategies.

2013, RIO DE JANEIRO: The United Nations issues a statement saying that there is no need for Brazil, a democracy, to still maintain its military police force left over from the dictatorship. The government recently employed this force to subdue the millions of protestors in the streets denouncing corruption, cuts to education and municipal infrastructures, attacks on gay rights, and the upcoming World Cup.

R and I march down Presidente Vargas Avenue toward the Governor's Palace with thousands of chanting Cariocas, clapping our hands in unison and feeling safe enough for the first time in our three years here to kiss in public. There is a buoyancy among this mass of humans. Hours pass. We march, sing, chant. I notice metal fencing up ahead on either side of the crowd. We are being corralled. My suspicion of corrals, especially those manned by officers wielding assault rifles, is not typical to urban Brazil. It marks me as foreign. But R trusts my instincts and follows my urge to fall back. The multi-city protests have remained peaceful so far, but tensions across the country have been mounting and this is the biggest manifestação yet. We push our way through the singing, through street vendors selling cans of Brahma beer

like this is Réveillon because they need the money. And because Brahma is everywhere. We find the first open metro stop and walk to the second. Something has shifted in the crowd. She senses it now. Two stops and we exit at Glória, walk up the metro stairs, across the white cobblestone, ring for the porter, catch the elevator. R checks Midia Ninja on Twitter for updates and tells me the police have fired shots into the crowd we just left, claiming a protester provoked them with a Molotov cocktail. An anonymous Midia Ninja reporter says it was a plant, an excuse to quell this historic, million-strong uprising with the threat of real violence. Several minutes and the streets flood with chanting, the metro vomits protesters. Armed tanks follow close behind, hurling “moral bombs” at their heels, into restaurants. History explodes on the uneven streets at the corner of Rua do Catete and Ladeira da Glória, makes our eyes water all the way up on the sixth floor. We rush to slam the doors, push towels and blankets into crevices.

The next day the newsstands are empty. I imagine those same protesters rushing to touch, to purchase a memento of the thing they cannot own: a past. I imagine them with their scissors and their cafezinhos cutting away the other headlines, mounting the

helicopter photos on the fridge. Maybe in a scrapbook or slipped between the pages of a novel. I imagine this as an optimistic act, one done in the someday I will show my children and my grandchildren a relic from the time I helped change the world, made Brazil better, more livable for them spirit. I imagine that they imagine how they will tell tales of how bad it was, how hopeless these times were until the Revolution of 2013. But perhaps I am overlaying my own experience as an archivist and oral historian. Perhaps these empty newsstands are simply a tribute to some human need to keep a tangible link to the past, a thing we can pick up and touch so as to prove to ourselves that we exist. That we may know, through our body, that other bodies have been here, are still here. That we are here. That we are not without them. That we never have been.

OCTOBER 2012, NEVADA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA: Gram in the hospital listening to Pistol Annies on her headphones, eating grilled cheese, oranges and yogurt. Grandma is lost. She has woven herself into so many lies, so much hiding and regret that she cannot tear herself from them anymore. It terrorizes all of us. It is sticky and draining. I fear this for myself. I don't want to wake up one day to a gaping hole that is my life. Lines of women broken on both sides. I wonder if wholeness can ever arise from this. I did not doubt before that it could, that I would be the one to heal it, but its weight grows heavier as I age.

2008: Tomás Montoya tags me in a Facebook post of a recent poster he's made. It bares the word POSTMODERN in large bubbled letters and underneath, in miniscule font, the tagline: *Western Man's last attempt to put together what never needed to be taken apart.*

Perhaps the tearing apart may not have had to happen in the first place, but language and culture are messy in their constant changing. Our cultural genealogies here in the Americas are much akin to the piecework of our quilting, a technique that sprung from China and was carried across India, Africa and Europe on the Silk Road, adapted and re-envisioned along the way, then carried to these continents and adapted further by settlers and slaves and those already here. We cannot pretend that we are whole already or disavow our scraps and relegate them to a waste bin in favor of the clean bolts arriving in ships. Postmodernism may be problematic, but we are full of problems. And solutions. We are ripe in our own complicating. We leave a trail of busted needles on the floor from trying to bind seven layers at once.

2014, CALIFORNIA: The old ones pass through my nephew's face, nestle in his skin a lick, get caught in a photograph, a smile, then pass, his face completely changed. We see his parents, an uncle, a grandmother, a great-grandfather, an aunt. Several months in this world and his face begins to settle into its own shape, a new one, with only flecks of light given off by those who came before.

[STUDIO NOTE: JAN 2015, CALIFORNIA]

Today: skinny dipped. alive, finally.

Today: woke at 5am and answered questions for an interview.
solid first draft, needs editing.

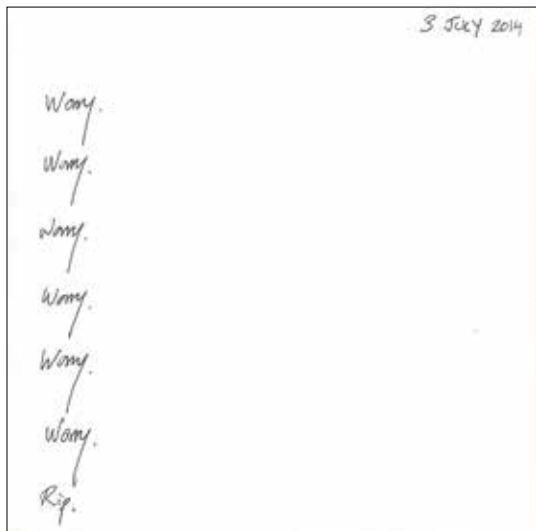
Today: visited my uncle. he hurt himself piling wood while I was sick.


Today: "The way to get unstuck is to get stucker for a while."

Today: strength.

2014, CALIFORNIA: My breast tissues engorge with memory, not milk. I hold my newborn nephew to my chest so my sister may rest, her eyes bleeding the need for sleep. I hold my newborn nephew to my warmth, to my body swollen with ancestral heft. My great-grandmother inside, plumping the tissues to welcome new life, her pain spun through a helix into nurturing. I carry other bodies in mine for loved ones and for myself. I am not to be mother, always knew this, but keep the maternal lines for those who scrape the cream off milk, hide the blood, trim.

At DeWitt State Hospital in the ward in which grandma works, lesbians were held. Held. A couched term for institutionalized. Back when queer was pathological. Back then is not back. It takes me seven years to tell my grandmother I am married to a woman. “Do you think I am some kind of prude?” is her response. “No, gram, I just don’t want you to be blamed or yelled at when gramp finds out or live with the fear that he will.”





SANITY IS SO
RELATIVE. IN
WAYS I NEVER
KNEW EXISTED.

CLOSE
TO
THE
EDGE
OF
SEN
SING
.

TO THE CRACK IN EACH
OF OUR BODIES. PUSH IT ONCE
AND THE KNOWING SLIPS THROUGH. VANISHES.

QUILTING IS ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY
FOR ME NOW - THE PULLING TOGETHER,
THE GATHERING OF SCRAPS WORN IN THE
LIVING, THE DAILY LIVING, REMNANTS, EPHEMERA
OF A LIFE LIVED IN DISPERATE PARTS.
THE PULLING TOGETHER IN A WAY THAT
BECOMES, CREATES ME. IN A WAY THAT
MAKES SOMETHING ELSE. I NEED THIS
PROCESS. I MAY DIE WITHOUT. ~~PATCH~~ PATCHWORK
IS THE ONLY THING REAL TO ME AT THIS
POINT.

[STUDIO NOTE: 27 SEPTEMBER 2014]

I peer into the shadows, join them for poisoned tea in the cemetery and find not malice nor wickedness, but pain. Only pain. My own and that of others. What we call depression is an auto-immune disorder. My fragility is what saves me. The acknowledging of it.

My body becomes home to an older, graver weight. My face ages quickly, within weeks, and for months stays this way. A heaviness fills the skin in, out. Its symmetry distorted, contoured, shifting. As I heal, however temporarily, my face regains its shape. It becomes me.

North America's colorful post-WWI quilts were made of fabrics dyed using German recipes acquired in the terms of surrender. I wonder if this moment in our human story, in this United States story at least, perhaps in this post-colonial New World story of which the United States is still part, is a time of healing. I wonder if we, collectively, are not at a place in which we can begin to acknowledge the pile of bones strewn hastily at our backs. If we can inventory the contents of our mass graves – the genocides and slaveries and silencing, the traumas and their ghosts – and begin to give ceremony to our dead behind us, as Audre Lorde called them. To perform burials, incinerations so that we might continue on in this world. I wonder if this is just a part of all living that we have forgotten. Because there is no linearity here. We are still dying. We still bury our dead in mass graves. We still murder ourselves. *In lak'ech. Tú eres mi otro yo. You are my other self.* A man dies at the hands of police. A woman dies at the hands of a husband. Children are slaughtered inside a school. Our churches are still burning. There are many ways to kill a human. Each body a shrine to the violence left in us.

That is the ideal, no?: that we do the work and do not numb ourselves. I battle a desire to numb in the face of these hauntings.

And some days the pain is too much. I binge on bad TV and boxed comfort food, smoke cigarettes, drink cans of beer. But even my own numbness allows me empathy with others who give into hiding. And this empathy seems somehow vital. Being able to hold our weakest parts means we can hold the weakest in others. And the most we can do for another human in this world is hold.

I spent decades studying the political and consciousness-raising movements of the 1960s and 70s as a child reared by hillbillies among hippies in back-to-the-land California, and later as an archivist and oral historian at one of the country's oldest Chicano-Indigenous cultural centers. I was privy to evidence of a particular kind of urgency that took place in that era, an idealism that needed to be so sure of itself in order to create a particular kind of change. Globally, major social shifts took place, affecting us all. Civil rights revolutions, counter-cultural rebellions, Tropicalism, "Third World" paradigm shifts and solidarity. By the 1980s, a new breed of psychologists inspired by these movements' calls of cultural recovery, by the work of Joseph Campbell, and trained in the methodologies of Jung, called for collective healing through the use of ancient stories and rites as medicine. Hollywood turned to Norse mythology with She-Ra and He-Man in the cartoon

medium. Writers like Gloria Anzaldúa, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and countless others pulled silenced histories up out of unmarked graves to create new artistic and theoretical frameworks in and out of the academies. Hippies across the Americas and Europe looked to Celtic and other indigenous cosmologies as foundations for a new future. Sun Ra and his conspirators looked back to Africa and then to space. Even in the 70s, groups like the Royal Chicano Air Force responded by adapting ancient Mesoamerican ceremonies to contemporary life as a way to heal the ravages of history. In the case of urban Sacramento, the RCAF held Fiesta de Maíz, Fiesta de Colores, Fiesta de Jaguares, Día de los Muertos, Fiesta de Tonantzín. They brought in elders from across Aztlán and México, appointed elders inside their own networks, claimed the ancient rights as their own, adapted them to their present in Indigenous-inspired traditions of continuity that challenged Western cults of rupture and tearing.

But to borrow a question from the character Lucas in that 90s film classic, *Empire Records*: “What is with today, today?” At the risk of projecting, I answer: grey. We are grey. That blurry grey of doubt and possibility and faded clothing and post-Post-Modern Xerox mash-ups. Copies of copies of copies. Meta everything.

The grey of the little rain cloud that follows Eeyore around, of the depression that pervades our historical moment and causes worry, judgment, spikes in pharmaceutical sales. But perhaps this grey is the grey of a necessary mess that occurs when *I* bleeds into *you* bleeds into *we* bleeds into *how*. Irigaray's *disruptive excess* now the faded backside of a patchwork heirloom about to become batting. Perhaps grey is right where we need to be. And it may be where we need to be and where we are, but where does the road out start? Where does it lead? Does that matter yet?

[STUDIO NOTE: 10 MARCH 2015, SACRAMENTO]

Give it life, not just detritus.

Call back, don't go back.

Quilting – the pulling together, the gathering of scraps worn in living, remnants and ephemera from a life lived in disparate parts – becomes necessary. The pulling together of soiled, used up, outworn shards, of all their ugliness and imperfection to create something that warms, protects, comforts. Something else entirely, not something entirely new. That patchwork quilting has become an iconic American art form speaks in some way to this continued tearing, wearing threadbare, assemblage and appliqué. There are plenty of contemporary community-based art groups that chose not to break from their multiple and seemingly contradictory lineages, that continue to integrate story-as-medicine and body-as-site-of-knowledge practices into our present. The movement of a needle toward mending, away from dominant imperatives of purposelessness and sometimes back toward them. People who do not feed the compulsion for fragmentation. In most cases, we do not need to sew our own coverings anymore, not out of necessity. Not when cheaper threads are available from Chinese factories in U.S. department stores. There is no purpose, really, in repurposing something like the quilt as form, this layered structure borrowed from China centuries ago. Except perhaps if we see our own continuity as having purpose *and* having none.

Contemporary psychologists document case after case of children of holocaust survivors, war veterans, refugees and domestic abuse survivors who have never heard the stories of their parent's or grandparent's trauma, who have been shielded from it, even its acknowledgement, who have gone on to live lives that in some way strive to correct the past or heal it. Others may continue coping with their parents' grief through addiction and violence. I refused to believe blood is thick. I grew up on New Age ideas of "detachment" and formed deep bonds regardless of relation across geographies. Family, my home culture, was something to break from. It was toxic, diseased. But today I cannot help but wonder, given all the research, given my own body and its inclinations, if there is not something powerful in this fluid that rushes through us, pushing us to heal or at least manage some pain that is not entirely our own.

It does not matter the quality of my song, only the act of my singing.

But it does not end there. Things do not end so cleanly. Seams unravel in the wash, leaving loose strings we must burn off or sever by biting. We may need to sew the same seam again, again, reinforce it. It is hip now to be ambivalent. It is the height of contemporaneity to not know anything for certain, to expose the process, to complicate thought and arrive at a precipice that promises to move us forward in becoming, but does not conclude anything except that maybe this is the moving forward: this complicating.

As much as I share these convictions about the importance of questioning easy conclusions and the inherited ways we see the world, I cannot help but crave answers, desire cures and full stops at the ends of sentences. I have been taught to expect such things from life, or at least to impose such these things upon it. But perhaps there is something we have forgotten, something we left behind with the broken dishes in exchange for post-Depression, recession denying self-help and at-the-height-of-empire optimism. Perhaps that something is simple, unadorned continuing.

My aunt has been writing a novel for over twenty years. This novel takes place in wartime Japan. This novel's main character is a young woman. This novel is not finished.

When my maternal grandfather died, he left behind a single diary. Each day was dated in careful penmanship and read: "Shocked corn." That was all it said. Each day every day for weeks. One may wonder why anyone would even bother to keep such an account, but perhaps it is just as honest a diary as any. Maybe documenting his movements in the same human way each day, tending to the most basic work as a means of bringing about the next day was enough. Nothing new or shiny or exciting about it. Perhaps after all the progress and perfection, there is still corn to shock.

[STUDIO NOTE: 13 JUNE 2015, CALIFORNIA]

I wake up late (6:50am), read for a few hours. Make coffee, toast a slice of bread. Scrub the sink with borax. Set out an ant trap. Re-hang the quilt. Write in my slip.

Alternate between pushing back and suturing a headache. Longing.

- - - - -

Whip stitch down. Attach back fabric, turn edges in. Self bind.