

Rotura

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para Manuel, vatako y hermano en palabras

*You build the fence we climb the fence
You hammer it up we rock it down
You draw the line we erase the line
You reinforce it we loosen it
You block it we dig under it
You use nightvision we use huaraches
You use bomb-smelling dogs we use chorizo-scented cucarachas
You ask Are you an American citizen? we say Yes way before you*

—Juan Felipe Herrera “Mexican Differences Mexican Similarities”

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A Question Before the Election

my mother asks if I've heard of the KKK—

a month later the election will turn in favor of a man
endorsed by them / a month later my wife and I will begin unpacking
how we represent what is not wanted here
(give us not your disabled nor woman,
not brown skin of self and family
and families) / a month later we will grow quiet
swiping at screens to refresh reality,
hoping the next flash of text and pixels will give us reason
to speak above a mumbled, grit-lined whisper,
to move the air beyond the pause
of remembering to breathe—

because she's heard
of a man who brings the worst
out of people / because she wants
to warn me
but is years late
to shield me from history,
from threats and sideways glances,
outright glares, from nights
of glass bottles broken behind me
thrown from cars crammed with frat boys
yelling: *Go back to your country!*
my mother asks if I've heard of the KKK—

a year later I will be thinking of lists in poems,

what it is one inventories,

makes space for,

stops to see in lists / a year later

I would list different things

my mother and I are years late for:

like me asking what it was like for her
when she first came to this country, or her
asking me why I write, why
I teach, why I do anything but
hide and stay quiet
like she asked me to be
as a child

a year later

I will have been walking

looking over my shoulder

for more than thirty years:

the man I am looking over my shoulder
not noticing that I march behind
the youth-I-was who starved himself,
and hoped to disappear, too busy
looking over his shoulder to know he marched behind
the teen-I-was in black T-shirts
who kept checking and correcting his English
and hating his skin, too in his head
and looking over his shoulder to know
he marched behind the child-I-was
alone in garage apartments staring out
the windows at trees and cars,
ducking down when a cop car passed
and closing his eyes

a year later
it will hit me
that these years of looking over my shoulder
are a list inside me that inventory,
make space for,
stop to see
the fear inside me—

my mother asks if I've heard of the KKK and I feel
the worst has found its way
into my palm, the worst
has me clutching it,
hearing it sounded out
in my mother's voice,
and I know then what I hold
in my hands will continue
to grow heavy—

what I hold in my hand trembles when

I cry / my wife cries / friends

tell me they cried—

when I remember
in a hushed hurried voice
as if we were calling to each other
from different parts of a dark wood
wanting to both call out and be found
but also not draw attention
my mother asking me—

¿has oído del KKK?

I feel

failure

desengaño

loss

decepción

breakdown

caída

defeat

quebrado

collapse

rotura

frustration

amargura

grief

—*bueno,*

pues,

si—