

**Reader's Companion**

*for*

**WHY MISREAD A CLOUD**

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Tupelo Press, 2022

Winner of the Sunken Garden Poetry Prize

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## What We Don't See, Remains

In July 2006, I was on scholarship to study poetry in Lebanon. A few days after my arrival the Israeli Defense Forces bombed the international airport, the first of many civilian infrastructures targeted. My mother, listening to news reports in the US, heard about the bombing before I did. She reached me through jammed phone lines in the middle of the first night to tell me: "You have to leave Beirut." Thought it didn't yet have a name, the July War had begun. By morning, it was clear that it would be safer to stay than attempt to leave, at least for the time-being. Not only had the airport been bombed but warships blockaded the sea and explosions cratered the road to Syria. Israeli tanks patrolled Lebanon's southern border, made more dangerous by rocket fire between Hezbollah and Israel.

I believed I would survive the psychological effects of the war—as long as I didn't see the tanks. The Merkava, Hebrew for chariot, were made for long-range continuous bombardment with self-propelled artillery that can fire without hesitation. I believed as long as I didn't hear their low rumble and the rattle of their track plates touching the earth, I wouldn't wake (though I did) sweat-drenched and screaming from nightmares for years afterward. I didn't see the tanks. From my balcony above the Mediterranean's blue-green, I saw the blockade by sea, warships lining the horizon. I saw fighter aircraft streak the sky and towers of ash in their wake. I saw attack helicopters descending upon anxious bathers on the beach, resisting the fear that kept us indoors. I saw the face of a gunner, a kid in his early twenties like me. Under their fire, the power plant exploded, plumes of ash and smoke filled the sky and ten million gallons of oil gushed into the sea. I didn't live on the shoreline. I had no children here. I had not, for all my life, loved the olive trees, the dew on their branches, the mountains rising from the sea.

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From the observation deck on the USS Nashville, I waved goodbye to my friend Fadi and goodbye to Lebanon. The sky above us all was filled with ash and smoke, as it had been for days. Further out at sea, where I was headed, the sky was a clear and cloudless blue. I had been one of the first hundred who Marines lifted into a second circle of concertina wire, closer to the sea. Encircled by that wire, some said, "We should've never left." Some were told they could not leave. Fadi leaned on a handrail, watching the evacuation and the Mediterranean's shimmering water. He watched me wade into it, backpack above my head, to a landing craft which carried me into the belly of the ship that would take me away from the war. After Fadi saw that I was safe on the deck, he returned to his car to drive home through the cratered streets. "I want you to love this beautiful country," he had said a few days earlier, insisting we visit the souks in Tripoli. We knew that after the evacuation, the war would intensify, a war my country of origin and tax dollars backed, which included delivery to Israel of precision-guided and cluster munitions.

As night fell on the crowded deck, we stretched out beneath the stars. I made a bed from clothes in my backpack, spreading them on the deck's non-skid surface. I remember my awe, seeing the stars again. I hadn't known where they were taking us, and when I asked, Marines shook their heads— forbidden, perhaps, to say. In the morning we docked in Cypress. An exhausted Marine complained: "We had to give up our beds for these people!" I didn't know some of us slept in beds. More than that, I didn't know why he thought I wasn't one of "these people." I didn't think about it as we were ushered onto busses and taken to a fairground. I didn't think about it until much later.

How can attention to the language we use challenge our capacity to see more deeply the power structures of which we are a part?

The fairground's exhibit halls were filled with cots in rows of twenty and cots on stages used for auctioning livestock. At the entrance, volunteers distributed sheets, coloring books, and balloons. When the first balloon burst the whole room seemed to tremble. I realized that, unlike the ash and cloud-filled sky which appeared to be behind us, the effects of what we had experienced were not. With any loud sound, the edges of my vision collapsed. Without saying what had happened we saw we brought it with us. Trauma has the ability to tear us from the present. This loss crucially includes the ability to experience joy in the present moment.

After placing my backpack on a cot, I explored the fairground. At the gates, uniformed men held machine guns at their sides. One said something in Greek and when I didn't understand, in English, "Do not cross this line." Inside another building, another exhibit hall with evacuees. I hadn't known there were so many of us. I returned to my cot and tried to sleep, riddled with nightmares. I didn't know what to do. And then I began to cry and couldn't stop.

Maybe I'll feel better, I thought, if I can find out what will happen next. I asked a volunteer at the entrance. "Shh," she hushed as I cried. "The best way to help yourself is to find a way to help others." In the makeshift clinic, a doctor tended a long line of people. I assisted the doctor, though I cannot remember what I did. After a short time, on the verge of a panic attack, I returned to my cot. Later, I joined volunteers setting out snacks and bottled water. One of them noted, "You seem comfortable talking with the evacuees." She told me that the elderly, the sick, pregnant women, and those with young children should be first on the flights to the United States. "Would you walk through the cots and get their names?" I did. I brought the lists to a little room with four computers. Though the methods seemed haphazard, I couldn't think of a better way. After we typed the lists, we posted them on a wall. There, evacuees would search for their names and the times of departure. Busses arrived and took them to an airport, flew them to the United States.

When the cots were nearly empty and we learned another wave of evacuees were on their way, I asked a volunteer if I could be on the list to go home. The room went silent. All of the volunteers turned in their chairs and looked at me. "We thought you were one of us," someone said. "Put your name next on the list," someone said. If I had been in fuller relation to myself and others, perhaps there would not have been such confusion. I had left myself out of the equation, and in doing so had left part of myself at the door, unseen. I moved, I acted, I tried not to fall apart. I joined one of the final groups of evacuees bussed to the airport. The flight attendants, like the Marines, would not say where we would land. One whispered to me, "We're not used to dealing with refugees."

At the luggage carousel in the Philadelphia airport, watching people gather their things, I began to cry. The airport's immigration police had just detained some of the evacuees and approached the rest of us with slips of paper about reporting what we knew about "terrorist activity." When the carousel was empty, and all of us who had been evacuated together dispersed, who would understand what had happened? With whom could we sit without explaining a thing? I was still crying when a man I had spoken with on the airplane lifted my backpack from the carousel and placed it at my feet. He said to me, "My child was killed." He said, "Look, you are here."

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I was here, back home in the United States. At night, the sound of the medivac helicopter landing at the nearby hospital entered my dreams. In my dreams it became the combat helicopters with chain guns and hellfire missiles that hovered above Fadi and me on the beach. It became those helicopters, but it was not them. When I screamed in my sleep, my boyfriend, Sten, would wrap his arms around me in the single bed we shared. “It’s okay, Em,” he’d whisper, holding me, calling me back, waking me up. In a few years we would marry and move to another neighborhood; there, it would be the police helicopters we would hear at night, their searchlights in our windows.

Despite the PTSD I was experiencing, it appeared I was safe. The fallacy was this: Thinking I was safe from artillery, I wanted to think we all were. Or, perhaps, more accurately: I didn’t want to think about it. As James Baldwin puts it, “It is certain, in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have.” Had I forgotten the history of this country? The history of my people? I must have, because I did not imagine that, six years after I returned home, a tank would enter East Liberty, a historically Black neighborhood in Pittsburgh where Sten and I, both white, had our first child. The Department of Defense had further militarized the police, equipped them as an occupying force. Summer nights were studded with sirens and megaphones ordering neighbors from their homes.

The first time I saw it, the tank pulled up beside the wide oak tree the children climbed, across the street from our neighbor’s home. The tank had a v-shaped hull designed to increase the survivability of those inside by deflecting blasts from landmines and IEDs away from the vehicle. It had sloping armor plates designed to make it more difficult to penetrate by anti-tank weapons such as armor-piercing shells and rockets. If there was a sound, it was a clattering. If there was a smell, the sweat-smell of fear.

I could see the tank now, that wasn’t the problem. The problem was being willing—really willing—to look.

The SWAT team carried shields and assault rifles; they knocked down the door, ordered everyone from their beds. When I leaned from my window to film, the turret on the tank pivoted, and the sniper shifted his rifle from their door to my face. There was a light in my mind where before there was none. I needed only to let the curtain fall. My whiteness would protect me, as it did and does. I needed only to step away from the window. Yet, what we don’t see, remains.

There were so many moments that could have opened me to seeing the connection between what I had experienced in Lebanon during the July War and this intense year of militarization and settler colonialism in the United States. But only when the tank arrived, did the connection become clear. -

Both 21<sup>st</sup> Century war and gentrification are founded on othering and perpetuate inequity. They employ militarized violence, propaganda, and economic coercion. They employ language to codify and make displacement seem like necessary progress or innovation. They obscure the violences required to conjure the illusion of a land without people, open for whatever. While parallels between war and gentrification are visible in our everyday, to recognize them required me to see the unthinkable: a tank beside the garden, exploding my learned frameworks.

Just as my experience remains shaped by my citizen status, whiteness, queerness, education, middle class upbringing, and being a parent—to name a few identity markers, some of which serve to protect me—so, too, is my ability to see.

What does the world look like (describe it!) when we recognize language that is used to obfuscate and language that is used to liberate?

The first time the tank pulled up, I leaned into the lush dark, phone in hand to film the officers. Sten whispered from across the room, “Careful, please. Careful, Emily.” I knew we have a right to film the police. I knew they couldn’t make me stop. But a floodlight spilled across the bedroom, washing the color from the walls. The tank’s turret spun toward me. “Move away from the window!” said a voice through a megaphone. I knew to listen when the sniper aimed his rifle at my face.

As I let the curtain fall, I saw that I had been hiding all along, hiding from what I didn’t want to realize about myself. The Marines, the guards at the fairground gates, the Cypriot volunteers, the flight attendants and the officers, didn’t see me as “other.” I passed into spaces where those they deemed “other” were not permitted. They said to me: “We had to give up our beds for these people.” They said, “We thought you were one of us.” They said, “We’re not used to dealing with refugees.”

Sirens pulsed on the walls as I crawled down the hall to our child’s room, out of view of the window. The elephant mobile spun gently above the crib. Still on the floor, I put a hand on Jules and felt his chest rise and fall in sleep. His bedroom was in the middle of our row home, where there was only one window. We had chosen that room because, as a student of mine, who witnessed multiple shootings by the time she was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, put it, “What if a stray bullet—”

Inside our neighbor’s house, a SWAT officer gave commands. Now I understood: as a white person, I would be protected. Just as, during the evacuation from Lebanon, I was among the first admitted onto the ship.

What I had not realized was that the “us” of imperialism—in which I am included—is a thorny circle. Of the circle, concertina wire comes to mind, which the military used to surround us and uses to slow tanks. The wires have sharp blades meant to tear flesh. Concertinas, on the other hand, are instruments that produce notes when you push or pull the bellows. As the instrument breathes, it sings.

“We thought you were one of us,” they said to me. I was, wasn’t I?

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When Sten and I purchased a long-vacant row home from East Liberty Development, Inc. (ELDI), I wanted believe that we were not displacing anyone. Yet, our presence signaled a welcome to developers and white folks. Shortly after we had moved in, ELDI announced their mission to “attract a new demographic,” a phrase that implies the otherness and wrongness of the current demographic. One of the first moves ELDI made was selling Section 8 apartment buildings. The residents were evicted, and the buildings were flipped. At the same time, ELDI posted grand claims about creating affordable homeownership through a mixed-income approach. Yet, the “mixed-income approach” priced many East Liberty residents out because it didn’t include deep subsidy units, which keeps housing affordable to extremely low income families.

My difficulty seeing has much to do with my relationship to the language used to uphold systems of power from which I benefit. Take the word gentrification. Gentry, from the Old French, *genterise*, “of gentle birth” in the sense of superiority of birth or rank. When we moved to East Liberty,

gentrification conjured, for me, well-lit rooms, high ceilings, hardwood floors, stainless appliances. Bit by bit, beneath what appeared a pristine veneer, I began to see what many of my neighbors had always seen in gentrification: cultural displacement, broken networks of family support, job loss, loss of access to city resources, changing schools, homelessness, increased policing.

What silences does a word hold? Whom do these silences benefit?

What would I have seen if, in place of the word “gentrification,” we used “settler colonialism?” Perhaps I would have seen, as one neighbor and resident, Deion "1.2" Hardy, shared:

[...] they make it almost impossible for the natives to come back. You have a chance to be on this list and the list is longer and longer and longer. All these rules that disqualify you from coming back to your home... This is not just a project or a development or a blueprint. This is where I live... They're stealing communities. They're taking people's memories, peoples heritage... You look around and your neighbors aren't your neighbors anymore. The whole neighborhood is a construction site. Buying it up right from underneath the families that are living there.

To push challenge the injustice of taxpayer-subsidized development that was displacing vulnerable residents, a group of long-time and new residents worked together to advocate for fair housing. One of the things we did was to organize a listening project about development. Two producers from a children's radio program along with two grandmothers and five children from East Liberty sat around our dining room table talking about the neighborhood—what we saw, what had changed. Jules, a toddler now, played on the floor beside me. The producers taught the children to use the recording devices and got them started asking questions we had come up with as a group such as, “What does development mean to you?” Tracy, who was nine, shared: “The people I live around, well, they're very nice. [Development] is about housing, getting kicked out, and vultures.” It's likely that Tracy meant to say “vouchers” in place of “vultures.” Yet, what she said revealed another truth. Yes, families were given vouchers to move. And, development companies and police landed at the front doors of Black and brown residents who were experiencing poverty. Once they had landed, development companies and police did what vultures do.

How do we use language to create life?

Partway into the listening session, there was a knock at the back door. I scooped up my toddler and answered it. The mother of two of the boys at our table stood weeping on the porch. “I don't want to be homeless with my children,” she said. She had just received an eviction notice. She had no job, no housing voucher. She had called the local shelters and they were full. “I have to tell my sons,” she said. I looked down at her hands, which had begun to shake and at my hands which held my child. I saw the porch that held us and would hold my family long after my neighbor and her sons had gone—where, no one had any idea.

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In Lebanon, fighter aircraft dropped leaflets with messages such as, *We advise you to leave your homes we are not responsible for the consequences if you ignore our warning!*; in the United States, 30-day eviction notices were taped to doors, blew across yards, sidewalks. In Lebanon, bribes from the Israeli Defense Forces, *No callers will be revealed the reward could be anything from cash to a new house!*; in the United States, the government offered vouchers for those who moved elsewhere, out of the “developing”

neighborhood. In Lebanon, I saw warships and fighter aircraft; in the United States, the SWAT team's camouflage, assault rifles, shields, and ballistic helmets.

The language of war is, after all, an imperialist one—whether at home or abroad. Not only did residents of “the old East Liberty” face the violence of displacement, they also faced an increasingly militarized police presence of which they were the exclusive targets. Development-directed policing has long been a strategy of racist “urban renewal,” “revitalization,” and “redevelopment” practices. Police make more stops, arrests, raids, sweeps, and crackdowns in gentrifying neighborhoods. Often this policing is connected to the “broken window” interventions that use aggressive tactics for misdemeanor arrests. What are the effects of a single arrest? Life-altering trauma, PTSD, and loss of immigration status, employment, and child custody. These arrests and this approach do not bring down crime rates. Research also shows that newly gentrified places are home to the most disproportionate policing, and that gentrification is directly related to increased police presence, increased surveillance, and increased police misconduct, including murder.

Outside our window, on a sunny morning in June, a white deputy shouted at Odell Brown, a black teenager: “Put your hands in the air!” I could hear his voice from inside our home. Since we had moved in that spring, white developers had built three pre-fabricated homes within a one-block radius of our home, on land where Black families had lived for decades. All of the homes would be sold to white families. Before nearing the window I placed Jules, who was three weeks old, in the bassinet. The deputy continued to shout at Odell. Someone who loved Odell called his name. Police, SWAT officers and the deputy surrounded him.

Eight years later, in March of 2020, the murder of Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky would make national media. The murder of Breonna Taylor was a direct result of racist, development-directed policing, part of a wider effort to evict Black residents from homes slated to be demolished to make way for new development. There are only a few news articles about what happened to Odell Brown that day in June. From the living room window I saw the circle the officers had made around Odell, the barricade of vehicles and police tape. I heard the deputy demand, “Put your goddamned hands in the air!” Whose hands are goddamned? And then the deputy shot Odell in the chest, killing him.

There are other details used to justify the police murder of a teenager. Including that Odell Brown had a pellet gun. Including the chief of police's response: he said he thought that Odell Brown was on a suicide mission and wanted to be shot by police. That morning, as I swaddled Jules on the floor of his bedroom, it occurred to me that because he is white his life would never be in danger in the way that Odell's life had been in danger. It didn't occur to me—and wouldn't until a few years later—that the murder of Odell Brown by the police directly correlated with what I was still calling “gentrification.”

What does the word safety mean when a country arrests and murders its way toward economic redevelopment? Whose safety is preserved? What is lost? Who is lost?

A handful of our neighbors had received eviction notices and were told their rent was late or that payments were missing. This happened to our next-door neighbor Angie, who had paid her rent on time in the home in which she lived for over a decade. And to our neighbor Mo, who had also not missed a payment. When confronted, East Liberty Development, Inc. offered brusque excuses and revoked the notices; however, they continued to issue these notices to other residents, many of whom had also not missed payments.



The rent had gone up or it hadn't. The residents were able to pay or they weren't. Regardless, eviction notices. Regardless, the message was clear: Your home was never yours. You're not wanted. "I feel ashamed," one neighbor said. But the shame wasn't hers. She had become a lightning rod for energy that didn't belong to her. The shame belonged to a system that took her home without regard for her humanity, to a system that wanted to take her humanity. "I'm leaving because I'm tired of it," another neighbor said. The landlord, instead of fixing the broken window in her living room, had nailed plywood over it.

Would the development companies have been able to do what they did if we had called it settler colonialism from the start?

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In the cafeteria at the high school where I was teaching before Jules was born, I told a group of colleagues that Sten and I had bought a home down the street in East Liberty. "You're an urban pioneer!" another teacher said, smiling. I cringed. "No, I'm not," I replied abruptly, and took a bite of my sandwich in the awkward silence. I didn't launch into my analysis of the term in part because I was baffled that he could be unaware of its imperialist history. I wondered if my colleague believed that the neighborhood would benefit from "urban pioneers." That, surely, was the angle of developers—that they were improving the neighborhood, saving it, by "attracting a new demographic."

This savior mindset can be followed like a deep underground river through this country. We see its evidence in white colonists calling Indigenous peoples "savage" and "uncivilized" to justify colonization. We see in a land that was cared for by Indigenous peoples, which white colonists stole. We see it in the government funded and church-run boarding schools to which native children were sent for decades, separating them from their families, land, language, and culture. In what we now call East Liberty, the principal historic caretakers are the Onondagawa along with the Shawnee and Lenape. The land that they care for is now land that is bought and sold; land whose soil contains dangerous levels of lead and arsenic, whose rivers and waterways are riddled with toxic chemicals, and whose air quality, due to pollution concentrations, is often deemed too dangerous for "sensitive groups" to breathe. In the language of developers, "revitalizing" East Liberty done nothing to care for the land and the peoples who live here.

The city paid millions of dollars in incentives to bring in Home Depot and after that, Whole Foods, Trader Joes, and Target. Since we moved in ten years ago at least 14 locally-owned business that served low-income residents were displaced or closed. Hundreds of residents have been displaced, part of what community activist Randall Taylor calls a "crisis of forced mass displacement" of Black residents. Did the neighborhood make "a comeback from decades of decay?" Is it "revitalized?" Is it having a "renaissance?" Did it "recover?"

The term "urban pioneer" implies a land without a people, a history. The term embodies erasure—although it doesn't make that erasure known. As if no one lived in East Liberty before I moved here. As if the white folks who moved in were the first. Could I be an urban pioneer if I was moving to a white neighborhood? Could I be an urban pioneer if I was Black? As if history started all over with me.

What changes when we use language to benefit a collective we?

When my colleague called me an urban pioneer, I rejected the term and judged him for using it. Looking back, I wonder if, having experienced decades of neighborhood violence—to which he lost friends and relatives—he might have hoped that development and the “urban pioneers” it welcomed would change that. What if, instead of paying millions of dollars of incentives to big-box stores, the city had, in the 90’s, improved neighborhood schools, public transportation, and job opportunities? What if the city had improved access to healthy food and green spaces and planted trees, expanding the urban canopy, creating wildlife habitat, improving air quality, and offering shade for the current residents? When my colleague called me an urban pioneer I wondered, *How could he be so naïve?* I wanted to finish the last of my sandwich and retreat to my classroom. Yet, any time I judge another, it is myself I am judging. What was it I was unable to face? What if he had called me urban pioneer’s more forthright sibling—*settler*, word that carries with it, its history.

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I had the idea to plug a bubble blower machine into the porch outlet before the police arrived again. The machine boasted “1,000 bubbles per minute,” “bubble solution for toddlers.” As the officers raised their guns, thousands of bubbles would fill the air. I imagined they wouldn’t be able to yell, or kick down the door, or shoot, that as the bubbles rose around us, they would be rising around the whole system of which we are a part. That they would reveal the preciousness of life, and its changing nature. That they would reflect the flashing lights of the police cars and also our homes and faces. That they would hold us all in their spheres. That a wall in the air would open and we would all be able to see what is really going on. We could all, for a moment, pause. We could, for a moment, stop.

In the words of the great mystic poet, Rumi: “What we have to do, then, is become the sun itself, so all fear of separation can forever be ended.” At the heart of *Why Misread a Cloud* is a search for myriad ways we recognize our own and one another’s dignity. My intention for this work is that it deepens our capacities for wisdom and compassion, for the benefit of ourselves, one another, and the planet. Like the Tibetan monk who told the Dalai Lama about the fear he felt while imprisoned; he wasn’t afraid he would lose his life. He was afraid he would lose compassion for his captors.

A gentle touch. A brief encounter. A sudden mirror.

The nature of the sky is not affected by the coming and going of the clouds.

I believe poetry can move like that.

A rudder in the wild sea.

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It took me too long, but I finally said something. It was spring, two years after I had seen the first tank. As SWAT officers with assault rifles slunk into the garden and hunched in the tulips, the plum tree’s blossoms in full-bloom on branches above their heads, I walked up the emptied street toward them. “What are you doing,” I said. It was less a question than a statement. How ridiculous they must have thought me as I stood in the street, my hands at my sides.

“Go back inside,” one of the officers replied. I didn’t move. “There’s a man with a gun up the street,” he said, his hands on his assault rifle. If he shot, a bullet would pass through the garden, the street in front of us, and hit Obama Academy. In a flash, I saw the sniper who, a few years earlier, had pointed his rifle at me and commanded, “Move away from the window.” These officers had already warned me to clear the area; now I wondered if their guns would turn on me. Would my lack of fear disarm them? When I didn’t obey and go back inside, did they still see it as their job to protect me? How safe was I in my white skin? How long could I stand there? How much could I ask?

The officers sat in marked cars. They sat in unmarked cars. They didn’t live in this neighborhood. They did not walk the street and talk to us. They did what the state trained them to do. They used the tools the military gave them. They parked in front of our neighbor’s home in a tank. They did not play basketball in the alley with the children. They did not know the names of our children.

What if, as I read about once, about Hattieville, Belize, police officers were instructed to play musical instruments with children rather than surveil their streets? What if, instead of using punitive means, we engaged a restorative approach focused on addressing the root of hurt and harm? What if we created space for people to understand one another? What happens if, instead of looking outside ourselves to “improve” whatever it is, we look within?

I walked home through the emptied street, past homes whose “values” would continue to rise, homes that would become affordable for only a few. I opened the door and stepped into my home, to Sten’s arms and Jules toddling toward me. The officers never found the man they were looking for.

“Look, you are here,” a man said as he lifted my backpack from the carousel.

“We thought you were one of us,” the volunteers said to me.

I was, once, wasn’t I?

2022

## Notes

What has changed since the collapse of Jim Crow has less to do with the basic structure of our society than with the language we use to justify it. —Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010)

Well, if one really wishes to know how justice is administered in a country, one does not question the policemen, the lawyers, the judges, or the protected members of the middle class. One goes to the unprotected—those, precisely, who need the law’s protection most!—and listens to their testimony. Ask any Mexican, any Puerto Rican, any black man, any poor person—ask the wretched how they fare in the halls of justice, and then you will know, not whether or not the country is just, but whether or not it has any love for justice, or any concept of it. It is certain, in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have.

— James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (1972)

Some of the information about fair housing in this essay comes from a pamphlet created by the Pittsburgh Fair Development Action Group, *Black Homes Matter: Alternate Approaches to Neighborhood Revitalization in the City of Pittsburgh*.” Not only does the pamphlet document the process of “revitalization” in East Liberty from 2012-2016, it outlines equitable development principals. [https://prrac.org/pdf/Black\\_Homes\\_Matter-Pittsburgh.pdf](https://prrac.org/pdf/Black_Homes_Matter-Pittsburgh.pdf).

*The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, by Stefano Harney & Fred Moton. “[...] I would love it if they got to the point where they had the capacity to worry about themselves. Because then maybe we could talk. That’s like that Fred Hampton shit: he’d be like, ‘white power to white people. Black power to black people.’ What I think he meant is, ‘look: the problematic of coalition is that coalition isn’t something that emerges so that you can come help me, a maneuver that always gets traced back to your own interests. The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it’s fucked up for you, in the same way that we’ve already recognized that it’s fucked up for us. I don’t need your help. I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly, you stupid mutherfucker, you know?’” – Fred Moton

“The nature of the sky is not affected by the coming and going of the clouds.” –Tempa Dukte Lama, February 2021, Olmo Ling Bon Center and Institute, Pittsburgh.

## Acknowledgements

Heartfelt thanks to Sten Carlson, Robin Clarke, Callie Gropp, Thomas Page McBee, Meg Shevenock, and Joshua Zelesnick for your readings, edits, and suggestions. This essay would not have been possible without your support. Thank you to the many writers who have influenced my seeing over time and the writing of this essay, especially: Michelle Alexander, James Baldwin, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Mahmoud Darwish, Toi Derricotte, Thich Nhat Hanh, Joy Harjo, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, and Adrienne Rich.

## Writing Prompts

### 1. Sustenance

*Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.* —Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*

Trauma, at the individual, community, and institutional level, has the ability to tear us from the present. This loss crucially includes the ability to experience joy in the present moment. I name this here to name the imperative of joy—whenever possible engaging it in our lives and—through presence and attention and love.

Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish writes about his experience during the Lebanese Civil War in *Memory for Forgetfulness: August, Beirut, 1982*. A little over two decades after Darwish wrote this memoir, I brought it with me to Beirut; it sustained me during the July War. Darwish showed me a way forward, reminding me of the possibility of bringing presence to the sorrow and the joy (and their inseparable nature) of being alive.

Water under these conditions comes to us like a miracle. Who says water has no color, flavor, or smell? Water does have a color that reveals itself in the unfolding of thirst. Water has the color of bird sounds, that of sparrows in particular—birds that pay no heed to this war approaching from the sea, so long as their space is safe. And water has the flavor of water, and a fragrance that is the scent of the afternoon breeze blown from a field with full ears of wheat waving in a luminous expanse strewn like the flickering spots of light left by the wings of a small sparrow fluttering low.

Recall five moments of sorrow/difficulty in your life—it need not be the most difficult things you have experienced. Make a list; try to get five in a minute. Choose one to write about for five minutes without stopping, without censoring yourself, letting whatever comes be there. Begin with a description of the setting.

Look deeply for something that helped to sustain you during that time—the elements, a sound or song, a smell or taste, a plant or animal, etc. Write about this for five minutes. If the difficulty and sustenance overlap and blur as you write, let them. Allow space for whatever comes.

### 2. Figurative Language

How does our relationship to language change based on the nature of our mind? A few days into the July War, as I watched warships in the sea from the balcony and lasers crisscrossed my room at night, figurative language left me. I could find it nowhere. No metaphor, simile, personification, analogy, allusion. The physical world was what it was.

Nothing like—

Nothing as—

Was it relation within me that had collapsed?

After I returned home and the ceasefire took effect, figurative language began to return. It tried to work its way into poems about the July War. I didn't let it. I wanted the writing to reveal—in content and form—the shattering effects of war. While figurative language can, at times, bring us closer to the essence of a thing itself, I wanted the poems to reflect the certain kind of attention staying *with*

requires, to resist leaping elsewhere. This process feels akin to staying with the breath in meditation, to noticing the sensation of the feet touching the earth while walking.

\*

For this writing activity, describe a moment from your day as fully as you can but without any use of figurative language. Your subject matter could be anything—waking up, eating a meal, walking to school or work or the park. Stay with whatever it is you’re describing without referencing anything else: no metaphor, simile, personification, analogy, allusion, etc. Do this for five days, about a different experience each day. Notice any changes in your writing and your approach. This is a practice to return to regularly.

### 3. Punctuation

*Why Misread a Cloud* opens:

I saw from my balcony, warships in the sea, you have to leave, mother said into the phone,  
jets broke the sound, barrier, sonic booms meant, to sound like bombs,

The comma comes in like a breath, and the comma fragments the breath, revealing the mind in trauma. A jet breaks a sound barrier and the noun “sound barrier” is broken into two nouns. The places that appear to hold us have gone—apartment walls, borders of the country, sentence structure, language; all is penetrable, fleeting, flown. The comma that is breath doesn’t move as it once had. The mind follows.

Start with this: make a list of quiet or calm moments in your life; try to get five items in a minute. Make another list of five loud or intense moments.

\*

Where do you feel a dash in your body? Do you feel it in the stomach, the throat, the fingertips...? What about where you feel a comma? A period? White space? Ellipses? Quotation marks?

Off the top of your head, list the punctuation mark that you connect with each of the following sensations: smooth, shaky, out of breath, clenched, airy. And with each of the following feelings: scared, delighted, sad, shocked, affectionate, ashamed, relaxed.

\*

Choose a quiet or calm moment or a loud or intense moment from your list and a punctuation mark that you connect with that moment. Freewrite about the moment for five minutes, starting with an image. Engage the moment in ways that reveal the state of mind of the speaker, ideally your state of mind during something you experienced firsthand.

*Play:* Remove all punctuation from what you have written. Add commas every five words. Are there enjambments or moments of incomplete syntax that create new meanings or reveal previously unseen connections? Has the meaning changed? Do this intentionally at intervals that you choose, using punctuation to put pressure on alternate meanings.

*Challenge:* Notice any changes in your thought patterns and syntax over the course of the day. Then, write about what happened before, during, or after the change.

#### 4. Recognition

In her essay, “Listening to Water,” Robin Wall Kimmerer writes of listening so deeply that she hears interconnection, or kinship, between raindrop and river. In so doing, she reminds us of the interconnected nature of all beings:

Down by the river, I stand and listen. The sound of individual raindrops is lost in the foaming white rush and smooth glide over rock. If you didn’t know better, you might not recognize raindrops and rivers as kin, so different are the particular and the collective.

What is something in your life that you haven’t been able to listen to, recognize, or see? Or things you know are there that are hard to acknowledge for whatever reason. Look to different eras in your life, from childhood through the present, for these unexplored features of existence. Make a list; try to get five in a minute.

“What do we see? What do we not see?” writes Muriel Rukeyser.

Look to different eras in your life, make a list of things you have recognized.

How do we wake to the world, to the worlds within and beyond the world? To wisdom and forgotten knowledge? How do we tend and pay attention? Be gentle with yourself about what you have and have not recognized, letting whatever is be as it is. Gentleness helps us to listen deeply, to attune to one another. Choose one thing from each list to write about in alternating prose blocks. If possible, begin with a sound.

#### 4. Roots

“If we believe that once we experience trauma, we are stuck with it forever to varying degrees, then doing whatever we have to escape our pain and survive from day to day makes total sense. But what if our triggers were actually love notes, a conversation between our lives and our bodies and our souls that we were being invited into? What if each triggering incident was part of a vast conspiracy to lead us back to the places where we abandoned parts of ourselves to survive? What if each trigger was a secret map trying to point us to the roots of our suffering so we could come back into wholeness and balance and health?”

—Langston Kahn, *Deep Liberation*

Write about something that triggers you as if it might, when you are done, become a note of love from the trauma to you.

Re-read what you have written and see if you can find a secret map to the abandoned parts of yourself. Then describe the map: where does it lead? What does it recover?

## 5. Somatic Writing

With a notebook and pen, go to a forest, city park, or a stand of trees in a place that you do not pass everyday. Sit facing a tree, allowing your eyes to rest softly on the trunk of the tree. Notice the sounds around you and the tree. Gradually stretch your hearing further, until it reaches the farthest away sound you can hear. Do this for three minutes. Remember the sounds in order as best you can. Write them down.

Think of a person with whom you are or have been in conflict—let the conflict be a 3-7 on a scale of 1-10. Name what upsets you about it in a word or sentence. And name how you feel about yourself when you think about the conflict. Write the person a letter, telling them whatever you need to say. You do not need to give them the letter.

Again, notice the sounds around you and the tree. Gradually stretch your hearing further, until it reaches the farthest away sound you can hear. Do this for three minutes. Remember the sounds in order as best you can. Write them down.

Allow your eyes to rest softly on the trunk of the tree. Listen for any wisdom the tree may add (you might hear this through words, an inner-hearing, images, any of the five senses, etc.). Write what you learn down verbatim.

Again, notice the sounds around you and the tree. Touch the trunk of the tree. Notice that even if storms or old age have torn the tree's branches, the tree is whole. When you are ready, thank the tree and walk quietly toward home.

## 6. Parallels

What do we see when we pause, when we stop? As I write this, tents are being erected on Randalls Island in New York City to house migrants bussed from Texas; nearby, in the park, one can see tents for a celebration of Indigenous Peoples' Day. Of this, a *New York Times* article, Porti Ranka Manis, a nurse and founder of the dance troupe Kinding Sindaw says: "There is so much parallelism. Why do people leave their country? it's not actually immigration, it's displacement [...] The indigenous people here, they're displaced themselves. They become immigrants in their own land."

What unspoken parallels do you notice in the world, the country in which you live, the state, the neighborhood? Make a list of these parallels; try to get five in a minute. Read "Democracy Poem #1" by June Jordan, "Dakota Homecoming" by Gwen Nell Westerman, "Logic" by Alice Notley, and "Mess Hall" by Solmaz Sharif." Then, using one of the poems as a formal model, write in lines of 1-6 syllables about one of the parallels you listed.



### **Praise for *Why Misread a Cloud***

“In brief paragraphs that are neither prose nor prose poems, we meet a witness. A speaker who is not in her country of origin. A person living in the air of violence. Militarization. And very occasionally, a mundane gesture—adding sugar to tea. The spareness creates a poetics that is, at once, elegantly stark and akin to journalism. We read between the lines because what is unsaid, makes this a poetry of image and association. What was once a broom for sweeping a kitchen, is used by a woman to sweep propaganda leaflets off the street. I find myself engaged in a place—to a place, really—where there are ballistic helmets. Yes, strange and strangely familiar. This is how art and dreams work: with the familiarity of knowing and the disassociation that can allow insight.”

— from the Judge’s Citation by Kimiko Hahn

“‘I needed only to let the curtain fall’ Carlson writes in the introduction to her searing and tender poems, acknowledging at the outset her skin privilege to not see state-sponsored violence—the atrocities of Lebanon’s 2006 war as it unfolds around her, merging, decades later, with the atrocities of police violence against her Black neighbors at home in Pittsburgh’s East Liberty. Carlson’s poems enact the very opposite of not seeing, framing fragments of testimony in high relief: Black families sired from sleep, an Israeli machine gunner’s face in close-up, aftermath of oil pouring into the sea. ‘Would you call it war or invasion?’ she asks, a question initially applicable to either scene, ‘My neighbors empty-handed in the street...’ In the empty hands is gentleness too as, elsewhere, a child lifts dolls through a missing door, or Marvin Gaye’s voice drifts above the poised rifles in police raid. Details of time and place repeatedly slip into a singular nightmare that haunts the narrator, yet she does not turn away. In exacting, sensorial language Carlson illuminates the heightened edges that trauma and love evoke, asking us to bear witness with her, while centering a question: ‘whose evacuation, whose drinks on a silver tray, whose mountain, whose moon.’ The question, unanswered, hangs in the page’s white space. This is powerful, wrenching work whose every line makes me feel my heart, want to see.”

—Meg Shevenock, Author of *The Miraculous, Sometimes*

“In these spare, bladed, sometime single-sentence, prose poems, Emily Carlson asks us not to let the curtain fall because, ‘what we don’t see, remains.’ These are compassionate, but blistering, poems of witness that twine together the violence, injustices, and ruination of two wartime geographies: the 2006 Lebanon War and the United States police militarization in an historically Black neighborhood. From ‘plumes of ash’ to ‘midnight ash’ to ‘wedding dress ash,’ *Why Misread a Cloud* spotlights collapse while simultaneously providing an umbilical cord to hope, because amid fear and devastation, is a newborn as well as a child who simply states, “My favorite part of me are my eyes because they let me see the beautiful world.”

—Simone Muench, Author of *Suture*

“In a dizzying and cinematic sequence, the prose poems that embody *Why Misread a Cloud* juxtapose images of war with the images of the everyday. Crucially accompanying these sensory moments of alarm are chasms of silence. What these jagged sequences and disruptions urge the reader to do is see that a cloud can transform into a fighter jet’s contrail. And just like that, the roar of a sonic boom disrupts what has been taken for granted. Emily Suzanne Carlson’s razor-sharp language urges us to look deeply at the contours of the sky and learn how, even at the edges of a peaceful horizon, there is the capacity for storm.”

—Oliver de la Paz, Author of *The Boy in the Labyrinth*

“Beautiful and searing, the short prose poems of *Why Misread a Cloud* accrue like snowflakes against a fence, using their delicate weight to allow us to better see what’s right in front of us.

Grounded in body and place, they offer not so much an account as an experience: of the fragmented moments that assemble into histories; of the disorientation of violence as it plays out across cities, homes, people; of the way the I evaporates in stages under such conditions even as it persists, which means continues to exist. F16s interrupt an afternoon of coffee and cherries. Sound cannons blare behind an infant nursing. By one imperative or another, people are forced from their homes. Here, without losing their specificity, different violences are allowed to drift and merge, to reveal their sameness, as Emily Suzanne Carlson points us toward ours.”

—Lisa Olstein, author of *Pain Studies*

## Biographical Note

Emily Carlson (she/they) earned a BA from Sarah Lawrence College and an MFA in Poetry from the University of Pittsburgh. Emily has worked in Ghana, leading the School for International Training's program for high school students; in Pontassieve, Italy and in Brooklyn, New York, working with horses; and in Beirut, Lebanon writing with the support of a grant from the University of Pittsburgh's Syria-Lebanon Nationality Room. Emily teaches poetry to high school students at a public arts school in Pittsburgh and is the Program Director of OMA Center for Mind, Body and Spirit's Art in the Garden, an LGBTQ+ led, liberatory, and joy-centered program that uses arts and ecology as a vehicle for addressing the impacts of childhood adversity and trauma. In addition to *Why Misread a Cloud*, Emily is the author of two other poetry chapbooks: *I Have a Teacher* (winner of the 2016 Center for Book Arts Chapbook Competition, selected by Mary Ruefle), and *Symphony No. 2* (Argos Books, 2015). Emily's writing has appeared or is forthcoming in journals including *Bloom*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Fence*, *jubilat*, and *Speculative Nonfiction*. With friends, they run the Bonfire Reading Series. Emily lives with their partner, the writer Sten Carlson, and their three children in an intentional community centered around an urban garden.

Emily's website is: <https://emilycarlsonweb.wordpress.com/>