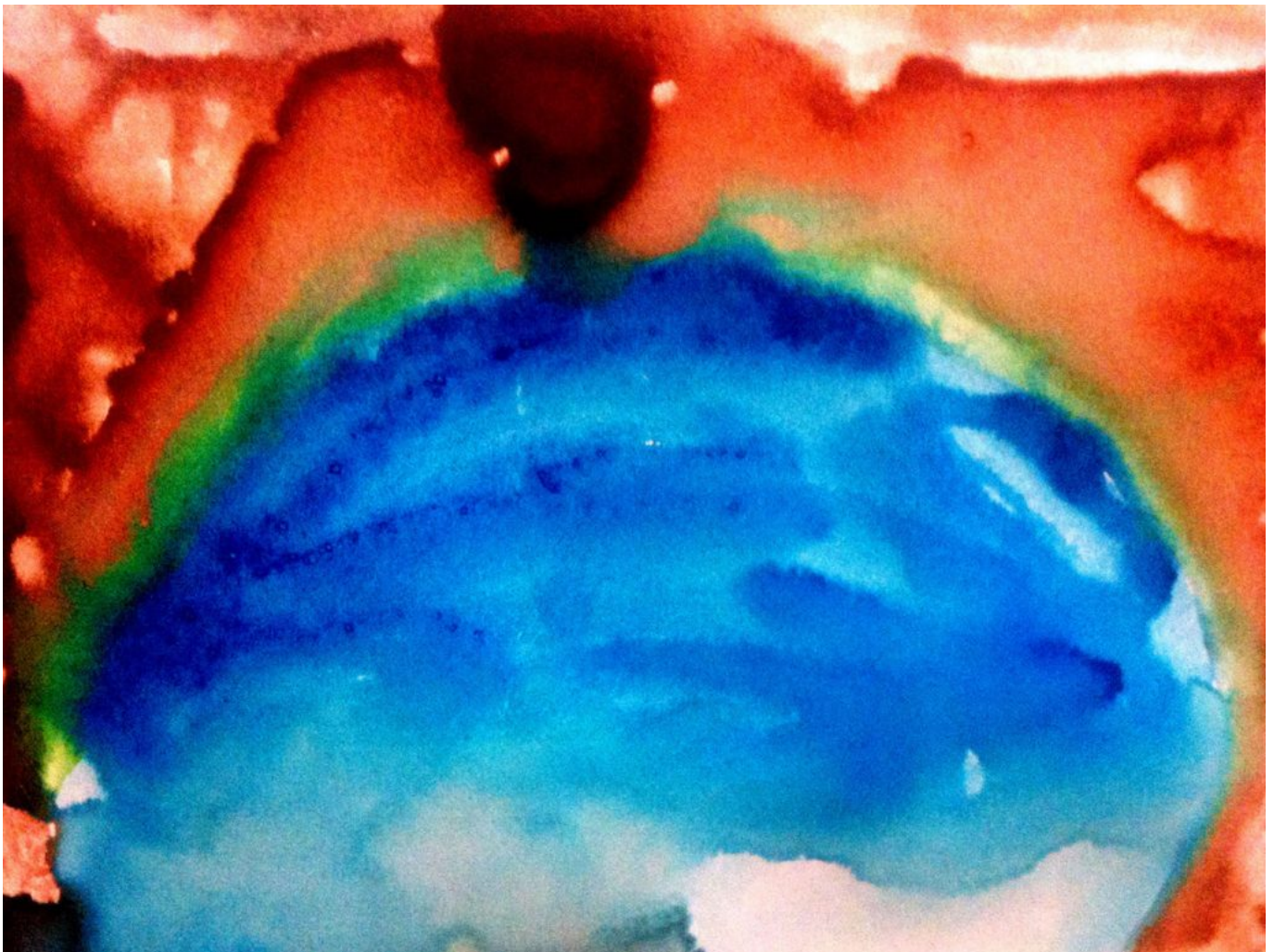


Caldera

By Aisha Sabatini Sloan

A few weeks ago I went to teach at a writing residency in Oregon. During my first bout of free time I decided to take a hike along the edge of an exploded volcano, which cradled an absurdly blue lake. I jogged for a while. I turned around in circles like Mary Tyler Moore and thought about how lucky I was to have come to the point in my life where my *job* was to be in the woods with rivers and lakes and to think up arty ways to play with writing and dirt.



The path turned off to the left away from the lake and I remembered what the groundskeeper had said about staying off of private property. A shot cracked the air open and I turned around and ran. Considering the possibility of a panic attack, I texted my colleagues: “Someone I am hiking and there are gunshots I am scared on trail aroun[sic] the lake” but there was no signal. I could feel that I was both ridiculous and also not ridiculous because all signs told us we were deep in Trump territory and there had been videos online of people in militias “preparing for the election” in a location that looked, to this urban-born child, a lot like this one. My mind flashed to the character in the narrative of Frederick Douglass who runs into a creek to escape a lashing and somebody takes out a musket and “in an instant poor Demby was no more.”

I surrendered my hands and called out, "Help! Hello?" and scooted down the hill on my butt thinking maybe I could cross the lake to get back. I peeked over the crest of the hill and there was another shot. Eventually, I decided that it was time to move again. I began to pick my way back along the way I came. I felt foolish for thinking that I was allowed to be there and to feel safe. I thought about Camille Dungy's anthology, *Black Nature*, and as I clasped my own hands together in a kind of prayer, I was also holding hands with those poets who spoke of hunting and hiking and blackness.

A hawk flew overhead and I felt very sure in that moment that he was keeping an eye out for me, though usually birds of prey make me worry because my hair has been plucked at from above more than once for what I assume are nesting purposes. The hunter whose gun I'd likely heard appeared with his family in the distance. I wanted to walk in another direction from them and I couldn't. We intersected and I tried to make conversation about the dogs but the younger two generations of the group, men in their thirties and boys under ten, would not make eye contact with me. All but the dogs were white.

The eldest man was kind. "You're perfect," he said, as I explained that I hoped I hadn't made a wrong turn and wandered onto his property. His words sounded strange to me in this context, like I was his daughter or a roasted turkey: "Perfect." When I got back to my very Norwegian cabin I put on some music and wrote everything down and I noticed that Beyoncé was singing "Daddy Lessons," which she had just sung at the Country Music Awards, and this had made a lot of people angry. As I listened I realized that I had no idea what her daddy meant when he said "shoot."

At the beginning of my hike, before the gunshots, I had been thinking about how to create a writing prompt based on the Eileen Myles essay, "What I Saw." In it, Myles describes the time she watched William Pope.L perform, *A Negro Sleeps Beneath the Susquehanna* at an artist's residency. He keeps uttering the word "crab." He keeps saying, "Wish I could dream." He straps a mirror to his back with jagged lines of tape stuck across it, wades down a river and disappears. Myles writes, "The mirror on William's back sometimes felt like he was carrying the river, that he was the river himself that he was it. He seemed to vanish into everything there was, walking further and further away from us. The voice was gone but you still felt it. And the breathing too."

I wondered if residencies are a bit of a thing for black people. Whenever I told a black author about what happened they chuckled and muttered under their breath, "Oregon."

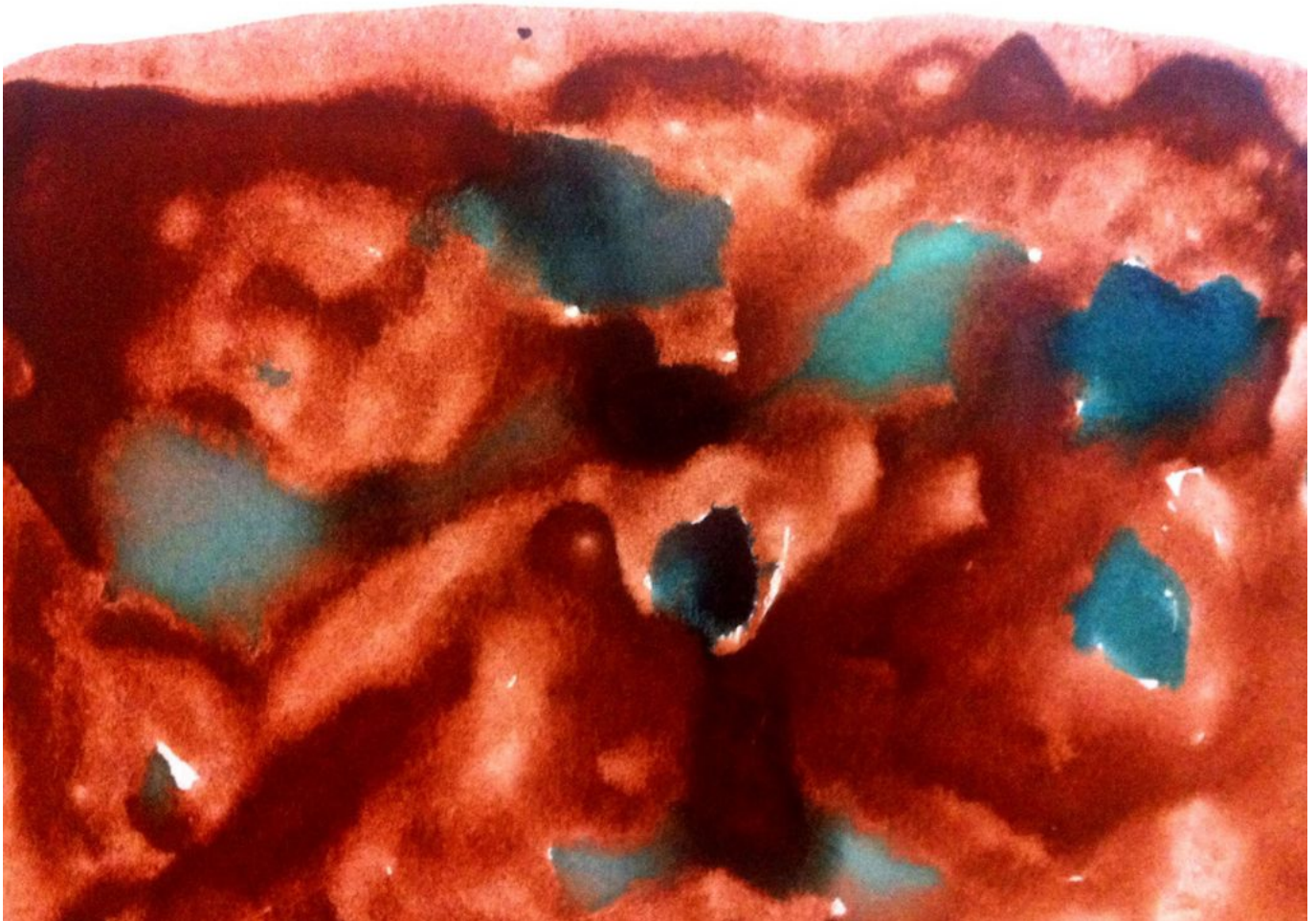


Months earlier, I had been driving to my job as an English composition instructor at a community college when I saw that the school was on lockdown. A police officer was hiding behind a giant sign with the school's name on it holding an AK-47. As I contemplated whether or not to turn into the parking lot, I began counting pairs of red and blue flashing lights. I saw an image of myself crouching into something, falling inward on myself into an unyielding place, into a corner or a vortex or a classroom. The radio was not on because I had turned it off because they had been reporting about the student who killed his English teacher and fellow students at a community college in Oregon the week before. I kept driving.

One night, some days later, a friend had a few of us sit near the train tracks at the center of town. She handed us a book by Clarice Lispector and asked us to open to a random page. My passage, the one I read out loud, was about eating a cockroach. The point of the exercise was to use bibliomancy to "read our lives," like tarot cards or a horoscope. So in this symbolic scene, was I the one eating the cockroach? Or was I the one being eaten? A little bit of both? When my dog hears me yelp in a certain way she will rush into the bathroom. I'll point to the cockroach and say "Kill it," and she will find it and tear it apart with her paws.

Another time, in a forest, I sat with a group of students on the day that forty people had been shot and killed at the Pulse Night Club in Orlando. We were a technology-free environment, so the students had no way of knowing what was going on in the world. I wasn't sure whether or

not to tell them but my boss began to play Sinead O'Connor's "Nothing Compares" on the piano in the dining hall downstairs and his voice kept hitting those high notes and I told my students that we had to leave the building. I ran out like someone about to puke, and by the time we got outside I was sobbing. I could feel myself swerve from grief into melodrama as I told them about the shooting. And what it felt like was crowd surfing. Like they had hoisted me on their shoulders and carried me away.



The election happened while I was at the residency in Oregon and as the results were coming in, while our phones were off, the poet CA Conrad was telling us a story about listening to a mash-up of the sounds made by extinct animals. He spoke of swallowing the crystal worn by his murdered boyfriend and shitting it out and writing out the grief that the rock gave him. Those of us in the front few rows could tell what was happening to the country because CA's eyes kept widening, trying to parse the commotion at the back of the room. Chairs moved. Screens reddened. Somebody wailed. I couldn't stop throwing up bile in the sink the next morning. When I finally met with my students again for workshop we moaned and stomped our feet into the absurdly blue lake. "What zone are you in?" My father asked me on Skype.

Brigitte was wearing a buffalo around her neck so I told her about the video from Standing Rock where a man is talking and then all of the sudden he says, "Look, look at the buffalo," and the video shows a herd of them appearing out of nowhere and my voice cracked when I reenacted it. She went off to watch the video on her phone, cupping it between her hands like water. Later, we decided that she had to scream something she had written while we listened from outside.

Later, I walked in and she and Shannon were harmonizing about rivers. Later, I found out that it was my little cousin who recorded a classroom full of children as they shouted “build a wall” to their schoolmates, to her, in a middle school cafeteria. Later, I found out that at Standing Rock, they built a wall around the buffalo.

On the plane home from Oregon, a man turned his head in the seat in front of me and he reminded me of a boy I went to elementary school with who would curl into himself like a bug if he heard the word Hitler. And I participated in the taunting. And his father was small and wore black and used crutches to walk. And in European history class during high school I would cross out Hitler’s name every time I wrote it, as if in penance. But there was nothing I could do to erase what I had done. And there was nothing I could do about the fact that the only way to get home on the day I was scared of getting shot was to cross paths with the hunter and his family.

[STUDIO](#): A piece created for SUBLEVEL.