

gULF COAST

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS VOLUME 31, ISSUE 1

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Perhaps each reflection births

a howl so shrill that each root, mountain, and river hears,

shudders and crumbles.

Perhaps,

a cactus

remains.

a ragbag

queer writing selected by Justin Torres

The best thing about being a queer writer is being in conversation with other queer writers—whether literally talking to their sexy nerd faces, or reading their work and letting their voices seep in like water feeding the roots. We read and respond, we are comforted and challenged, but we find one another, over and over again. Some of the writers collected here I’ve known for decades, we were baby queers coming up together, stumbling away from families and into new ideas of family. I’ve shown up in their work (or at least some avatar, some resemblance, some essence of character) and they’ve shown up in my own. Some of these writers were “students of mine” once, which I put in ironic quotation marks because I learned from them then, am still learning now. One writer I met at a dinner party a couple of weeks ago, another I’ve never met, but came across their work at the insistence of a friend—but whatever the circumstances for their inclusion, the unifying factor for these writers is that they’re *doing the damn thing*, figuring out how we hurt and heal and act in a world that needs remaking, teasing it all into language, making the work move, they’re doing it, and doing it queerly.

What to call this gathering of pieces? Certainly not *Taking the Pulse of Queer Literature*, or anything as monolithic and presumptuous as all that. *A Cacophony of Rightly Discordant Pulses*? Too wordy. *A Portfolio* is too tame and organized. *A Pastiche* or *A Mélange* are both too...French? So how about *A Ragbag*. I love the sound of that word, which brings to mind punk repurposing, brings to mind tearing, clashing colors and patterns; something utterly queer, and mixed, and useful.

—Justin Torres

We Can Pretend

Our summer housesit is in the Los Feliz hills on a street that exists for only one block, tucked between the busy evergreen-lined boulevard and a winding residential street studded with speed bumps to thwart the shortcutters. I've finished my first book but it won't be published for nine more months, so careerwise I am also in a place that exists only briefly, between the back road and the roar, and I don't know which one I'm facing or what to do with myself in the meantime. Those towering cedars on Los Feliz Boulevard seem incongruous and marvelous to me until I see a photo of the early settlers at the La Brea Tar Pits, oilmen in the 1870s showing off their sticky slick haul of bones, and in the background there's nothing but evergreens all the way to the Santa Monica Mountains. What belongs in this place? Almost nothing that currently lives here. Or almost everything, since things thrive here that struggle elsewhere: palms, citrus, avocados, immigrants, queers, my love.

The house lies halfway up the sloping block, and upstairs, through the divided lights and wavy glass, you can see red-tiled rooftops and the golden hillside of Griffith Park, a few tall palms silhouetted along the ridge, their bobbleheads and spindly trunks like a caricature of the favored body type for actors: lollipops, my friend calls them. Big heads look good on screen. Or rather, big faces. The owner of this house, my old friend, has a face that's large for her small head, and it works for her, startlingly telegenic. On camera, my own big head can't support my ordinary-sized face. My love, who dodges all cameras, has an exquisitely shaped head, if one can say such a thing without sounding phrenological—what I mean is that the close-shorn back of it curves beautifully around and down to a slender neck. Long ago when I came out and cut my own hair short, my skull revealed odd planes, a smashed boxiness, charmless cowlicks. Also, my neck is too short and thick. This is the culture we live in, this is what humans do: obsess about conformation, decide a perfectly functioning neck is nonetheless *too something*. Okay, the neck is good. It's holding up my head, and my head is the important part, unshapeliness

notwithstanding. Though I'm generally content in my own skin, and grateful for that, I wondered if I might develop some kind of light body dysmorphia in Los Angeles, that the obsessions I mock would nonetheless rub up on me enough to leave a mark. Instead I eat ice cream every day, run up and down hills until I injure my knee and go sedentary, accidentally get tan, smear copious amounts of fine cheese on generic crackers, and never get around to a bikini wax.

There is no more reason to develop dysmorphia in Los Angeles than anywhere else. My friends here are old friends and queer friends. I'm not hanging with the Hollywood set, or rather, the handful I know are writers and producers and camera people, not actors. I walk through my borrowed neighborhood and although it's wealthy now, all kinds of people move through it, and I am one of the all kinds. There is one homeless man, the homeless man, who sleeps every night on Los Feliz Boulevard, curled up against a retaining wall in front of an apartment building, his tall overstuffed suitcase parked upright, watching over him like a companion. During the day the man rambles around, sometimes with the suitcase and sometimes without; once I saw the suitcase standing alone at Copy Cat, where the employees graciously ignored it. The man is in his fifties, white, lean, medium-to-short, his deeply tanned face Clint Eastwood-leathery and sharp, his hair a salt-and-pepper mop; he may have been handsome, he may have been an actor or tried to be, he may have been a professional of some kind who had a mental break, or maybe I ascribe these aspirations to him because he's white and lives in Los Feliz. His past is not mine to know. He's mostly quiet but as the summer heats up, so does he: he sits at the bus stop with his head in his hands, or walks down Hillhurst ranting about dragons, a finger raised in the air in front of him.

He belongs to the neighborhood and it belongs to him. The tacit permission the otherwise paranoid neighbors have given him to be The Homeless Man reminds me of Ursula LeGuin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," the story where at the edge of a thriving, happy town there is a pit and in the pit is a child who lives in filth and fear, and the people periodically walk to the pit and gaze down at the child, and then return home, a necessary rite to recognize and understand their

own happiness, because without its obverse, happiness becomes generic, default, and then it's not happiness, it's just ordinariness. The man sleeps curled up on Los Feliz Boulevard and you can project onto him whatever aspirations and failures you wish—personal, systemic, mental, economic—and recognize all the ways in which you have not failed, which might be as good as saying succeeded.

And then you take the keys out of your pocket and unlock your front door and recede into the oasis and enclose yourself in success, even if it is not entirely of your own making. Or at all.

I take to browsing real estate sites to see what I could own here. To imagine a life in neighborhoods I don't know at all. Is this the first act of the gentrifier? The fact is of course I can't afford any of it, except with imagined money I haven't earned but want to think I could—the actual American dream, the American delusion. I've come to believe that it's a mistake to tell a kid too much about their great potential. It's too easy to think of potential as a real thing, when instead it's more like a high credit limit. Potential is imaginary money, and I lived a life on credit for a long, long time. I have waited for others to pick me, *pick me*, subconsciously, as if I'd be a standout just by radiating my potential, writing here and there and being personable. I can feel it everywhere in Los Angeles, this disoriented potential: all these people who want so badly for something to happen, for a new opportunity to arise, and yet who don't know how to do it, what lucky waiting room to stand in. What is so seductive and thrilling about falling in love is that someone picks you. Out of everyone in the world they choose you, and for a while you are the best choice ever, you are perfect, and everything seems possible, not just love. Then it gets real and complicated and then you realize you have work to do. A tremendous amount of work. Whether you stay or leave, you will still have to do the work. Whether in love or art, the mistake is believing in the waiting room: that someone will open a door, lay eyes on you, and like that, legitimize you.

In my pre-publication malaise, I try to revel in a certain luxury of finding myself between projects. I have never finished something so major before. And now I get

to have this conversation with people more accomplished than I: *What do you do when you finish a book or a movie or whatever? Do you too feel this lost?* Yes, they did, they do. This fills me momentarily with a sense of place, of purpose; this is not my laziness, ennui, disorientation, this is what happens to *artists*. But I know myself. I open Instagram constantly. I write two sentences and close the notebook. I loll by the backyard pool I feel guilty enjoying in a drought climate and thus refuse to heat to a temperature bearable to normal people, yet feel compelled to use so the water isn't squandered. At first I only float on pool toys, shivering, paddling myself into the shrinking sunny patch in the corner, but as the summer warms I start going under. Until I ruin my knees, I run in the morning and then strip down to sports bra and underwear and jump into the pool; the whole point of the run becomes that moment, that plunge into the water, skin hot and heart thumping, the pool cool and silky, the instant recalibration of all sensation. A body of water. I belong to the water. In the water I can't write, I can't do anything but dive, drift, think, stay afloat. I picture that polar bear in the Minnesota Zoo who swam for hours in the same repetitive pattern, how his white fur greened with algae. I turn onto my back and look up at the sun shining through the branches of the dead pepper tree and think of how the personal swimming pool is peak anthropocene, how my own death will be nothing compared to the epic species death we hurtle toward, how all our literature will be indecipherable to whatever comes next.

But I come to love the pool the way you love anything precarious and beautiful. I love how it's still and glassy in the morning, the filter pump whooshing to life at 8:46 am, the soft rush of its twin flat waterfalls all day, the evening moment when they abruptly die and fall still, the water growing dark and unfathomable as night falls. And then the moment when the underwater lights blink on and the entire backyard glows with it, a luminous blue jewel we sit on the steps and gaze at. It will never be ours, but we can pretend.