

How to Tell a Story

I am given a choice: to look at the world
or to become it. Paula draws two lines
growing ever outward. I flip the notebook over,
needle further and further toward a center.
I open my mouth and my life rushes in.
I close my eyes and am fraught with scenery.
Write about the boy without the weather
on the mountain. Write about the boy and give
each blade of grass its own name. So what
happens next? Hold a bunch of gravel in your hands.
Hold a bunch of history in your hands. Draw a family
tree with no branches and so many leaves.
Technically, we're in a Kung Fu Tea. I'll show you
what I am if you'll show me what it means.

Housekeeping

Mom drives backwards on the highway,
exits H-1 then reenters
in the other direction. It is 3pm
and the kettle is on in our apartment
with no one in it. Strong tea, a cup
before her second shift of the day, no time
even for this, to turn the fire off.
In traffic, she sees the stove
still working, the smoke gathering
to take everything away. She opens the door
and cannot breathe. The kettle is waterless, warped
and blackened on the flame, somehow the only ruined thing.
She doesn't throw it away.

At the hotel, Mom folds her secretarial clothes,
changes into a uniform: some days to wait tables,
others, to tidy the rooms of guests.
On dinner break, she naps in her car.

These rooms are home
to no one.
When they leave,
they throw
towels on the floor.

To Go Back Is to Sever

When I am back home with no one left to call
I take two buses to Waikīkī to watch the Friday
fireworks alone. Families line the sandy patches
along the marina, dragging coolers and folding chairs.
In the Ilikai courtyard where once I raised signs
protesting condo conversions with Kimiko and
Florin and Patrick, I lounge now, unquestioned,
killing time before the show, which costs the Hilton
ten thousand dollars every week or somebody's
six month's rent. At 8pm, the sky is filled with smoke
and light, mirrored and murky in the lapping Pacific.
I pull my collar over my nose and barely breathe.
Ten minutes later, when the last firework is extinguished,
I push my way through the crowd toward nothing.

The Ninth Island

It began as an ad, a place to drown
our sorrows on unpaid vacation.
Classmates back at school with the newest
yogurt-dipped snacks from Trader Joe's,
consolation prize for nights spent alone
in mainland hotel rooms, parents downstairs
trying the last of their luck, casting sweat-slicked
prayers in jangling casinos. The joke was:

So many Hawai'i people come to Vegas,
it might as well be the ninth island.
So we eyed the gravity of dice while developers
eyed the land that holds our beloveds' bones
and the shore became something
unrecognizable. When time came to flee
from fires, the state, the rent
everything spent and the remnants

of home stuffed into a shopping cart,
we pushed so far the sidewalks became tides,
the cart a makeshift ship we staked
our lives to and somewhere in the night
the Pacific gave way to an ocean of sand
the horizon buzzing with delirious heat,
eight islands gone behind us and we thought
there was nothing left. We were wrong.