

PEN America Presents

# The Final Reading

*with our 2020 Emerging Voices Fellows*

Damien Belliveau, Megan Dorame, Shannon  
Gatewood, Claire Lin, and M. Kiguwa

Presented Online  
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# THE FINAL READING

*Featuring Our 2020 Emerging Voices Fellows*

Shannon Gatewood  
Claire Lin  
Damien Belliveau  
Megan Dorame  
M. Kiguwa

*Introduced by the 2020 Emerging Voices Mentors*

Rachel M. Harper  
Charles Yu  
Chris L. Terry  
Vanessa Angélica Villarreal  
Antonia Crane



# Table of Contents

5	Letter from the Fellowship Manager
6	Grants & Donors
7	Special Thanks
8	Program Information
9	Selected Works: Shannon Gatewood
14	Selected Works: Claire Lin
19	Selected Works: Damien Belliveau
25	Selected Works: Megan Dorame
34	Selected Works: M. Kiguwa

# Letter from the Emerging Voices Fellowship Manager

The Emerging Voices Fellowship (or EV) is one of PEN's literary programs that has been bringing people together in support of marginalized writers since 1996. "It was ahead of its time," 2010 Fellow and founder of Makara Center for the Arts Marytza Rubio said to me last week. A literary mentorship that continues to provide underrepresented, unknown writers with the skills and connections they need to launch professional careers in the arts. And I say the arts because it's not just about books (though not so humble brag—we do have 65 titles and counting to our names, as well as hundreds of additional awards, publications, and honors) on top of that, some of our 151 alumni—Kima Jones, Victor Vazquez, Jian Huang—while still writing, are also creating residencies, casting companies, and public relations firms that prioritize the same populations that EV seeks to uplift—Black, Indigenous, People of Color, LatinX folx, those who identify with the LGBTQI+ community, women, immigrants, children of immigrants, older folx. In short, survivors.

We are the haunted ones. Existing in the liminal space of *el Olvido*, as Rocío Carlos explained to me when she was a guest on the EV podcast. She then pointed me to han. In an essay by Janice Lee, Janice quotes South Korean theologian Suh Nam-dong, who describes han as: *A feeling of unresolved resentment against injustices suffered, a sense of helplessness because of the overwhelming odds against one, a feeling of acute pain in one's guts and bowels, making the whole body writhe and squirm, and an obstinate urge to take revenge and to right the wrong—all these combined.*

Han. I can't think of a better way to explain why Emerging Voices Fellows feel compelled to write and why our stories are so important. And yet, in a world divided by color and built on the backs of enslaved peoples, it is also the thing that holds us back in the publishing world. We are unknown commodities. We are underpaid and often exploited. We are told that we are a hard sell. We are too dark, we are depressing. I call bullshit. Because fellowship is defined as a community of interest, activity, feeling, or experience. There is joy in belonging. In being seen. In community. I know for a fact that people like us are hungry for our stories. Once you've heard Damien, Megan, Shannon, Claire and M. read, you'll know it too.

While the professional tools the fellowship provides have continued to multiply from year to year, mentorship is still the cornerstone of EV. Fellows are paired with professional authors who provide personalized one-on-one attention and targeted feedback on works in progress. And if you are a writer, you know how vital this is: finding someone you trust and admire to dedicate themselves to your work. We've asked the mentors to write introductions for their fellows so that you can get a glimpse into this experience. An understanding through personal narrative is the most powerful kind of knowing. I'm so excited for you to see.



Amanda Fletcher  
Emerging Voices Fellowship Manager

# Grants and Donors

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**ADDITIONAL SPECIAL  
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# Program Information

The Emerging Voices Fellowship is a literary mentorship based in Los Angeles that has been providing underrepresented, marginalized writers with the tools they need to launch a professional literary career, since 1996. Examples of these communities include, but are not limited to, women, immigrants, people of color, older people, and those who are members of the LGBTQI+ communities. Through curated one-on-one mentorship, and introductions to editors, agents, and publishers, in addition to editing, marketing, and web development workshops, the fellowship nurtures creative community, provides a professional skillset, and demystifies the path to publication, with the ultimate goal of diversifying the publishing and media industries.

# SHANNON GATEWOOD

## Mentor Rachel M. Harper Introduces Shannon Gatewood

This is a dynamic time to be an American. It is a strange and challenging time to be a person of color in America, and as it's been throughout our history in this country, an unsettling time to be African American. It is also an interesting time to be in the arts. There is a profound responsibility in being an artist, being a writer, because you are called on to translate your own lived and breathed experience into a story for others to contemplate, understand, value, and recognize. And when you are a Black artist, there is often a double burden—or perhaps, it is a gift. *To be young, gifted, and Black*—as Lorraine Hansberry wrote, as Nina Simone sang—a label many of us strive to live up to.

Shannon Gatewood is one of these strivers, already living up to the promise of the label. Like Hansberry, Shannon is from Chicago, and she writes of family life in her hometown in much the same way. In her novel, *Daughters*, Shannon brings the Watson family to life, telling the story of restaurant owner Michael Watson, a pillar of his community, his wife Maryanne and their two adult daughters, Lena and Reina, who work together with their parents to keep their popular soul food restaurant running smoothly. When Michael unexpectedly dies in the beginning of the book, the story shifts to the three women in his life, who now have to come together to bury their patriarch, while also dealing with the surprise reveal that Michael has another daughter, Sophie, the result of an affair he had with a white woman when his daughters were much younger.

What happens next is a story that all readers can relate to, as each family member struggles to accept events in the past and present—things they've done and failed to do, things they've said that can't

be taken back, and all that remains, perhaps regretfully, unspoken. This is a story about one family's attempt to reconcile a major loss, but it is also about how we try to forgive each other for our faults; how we are forced to endure moments of shame, regret, abandonment, and heartache, often from those we love and trust the most; and how we recover from betrayals by those who are meant to protect us.

In writing about these universal themes, Shannon brings her many strengths to bear on each and every page: her unique and clever phrasing; her gift for exacting dialogue; her biting wit; and her clean, concise prose style. In scenes rich with conflict and tension, her characters emerge as fully realized human beings, people you want to laugh with, cry with, shake, slap, and hug—people you will recognize and admire, in a story that is at once dramatic and devastating yet full of hope, like America itself. A writer of our times, and very much needed in this time, it is my pleasure to introduce Shannon Gatewood.

## Shannon Gatewood, Excerpt from *Daughters*

Friday nights at *Mike's* were the busiest, which meant all hands on deck. Maryanne would bustle back and forth between the kitchen and the front counter to make sure orders got out. Her daughters Lena, who would greet and seat people with an attitude, and Reina, who could balance two full trays without even trying, would man the front end. Michael, the patriarch, would be seen doing any and everything, from flipping burgers with the cooks to bussing tables and soothing crying babies, so that restless parents could at least get a chance to eat. This family-owned soul food joint was nestled on the far south side of the city, but would draw people in from all over Chicago, especially on those Friday nights.

Now, *Mike's* was closed. It had been closed since the day that Michael Watson passed out right in the middle of delivering a water refill to Mr. Johnson at table six. The elder, who came in every Tuesday afternoon for the catfish special, attempted to catch the falling man, but couldn't move quick enough. No one could. So, the man and the pitcher hit the ground, hard. Reina dropped the tray she was carrying and ran to her father, almost slipping, while Lena stood frozen at the front counter. Reina had to scream twice for her to call 911 before she moved. Maryanne, hearing the commotion, emerged from the back to see her husband on the ground and her daughter listening for a heartbeat while whispering prayers into his chest.

"Please, please, please! Don't do this!"

Mr. Johnson leaned unsteadily on his cane and yelled, "You have to do CPR!" over and over with the "R" lingering longer each time he said it. Even after someone had started the compressions, the man's groans continued until he burst into a coughing fit and had to be walked over to a chair to sit down.

The paramedics took too long to arrive, and even though she was his wife, they didn't let Maryanne ride in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. A short time later, she could vaguely pinpoint how she got herself behind the wheel to even get there. She remembered someone, probably one of her daughters, shoving car keys into her hand. She could somewhat recall telling them in a rushed tone to lock up and to meet her at the hospital. She paused, thinking of how she must have blown through the stop sign at the end of the block, all in an effort to catch up to the ambulance. In her mind, how closely she trailed the blaring truck had to be a determining factor in whether she would lose her husband forever.

Sitting in the waiting room, she couldn't be sure that any of those things happened in that order, or at all. The realization that her husband was in another room dying was enough to disrupt her thoughts and confuse her over and over again.

It wasn't just that Michael could be dying. She had lost people close to her. Her own mother had a long battle before she died in her 80s and when it did happen, it was almost expected. The preparation by no means made it easy, but at least she had time to process, at least she saw it coming. She had long ago accepted that she and Michael weren't young anymore; she couldn't move like she used to. Aches were regular and medications lived in the bathroom cabinet, but none of those things could warn her that they didn't have more time.

It was the sudden nature of it all that she couldn't stomach. Just the night before, he had finally agreed on her paint color for the kitchen. "Winter Peach" wasn't an easy sell, but she had worn him down over weeks of paint swatches and pillow talk. On those same pillows, she had convinced him to buy patio furniture for the summer and a playhouse for their grandson, and she asked him to trim his coarse beard that he loved to grow out in the fall.

"Get rid of this," she said. "It's too rough." Running her hand along his cheek, she said, "Look, I just cut my hand. I'm bleeding! Do you want me to bleed?" He appeared to laugh it off but made sure to leave his clippers out on the bathroom sink for the following day.

On the morning of his attack, she'd decided her new goal was to get rid of the shop's yellowing menus. This would be her biggest challenge. He loved them, and at every chance he got, still boasted that they were the originals he had hand-designed over 20 years ago.

"They're an antique, a national treasure," he would say, looking at one fondly, before taking a stack to customers. She hated those menus and had prepared a sound argument to get them reprinted. With the sudden reality of an emergency room, the argument meant nothing, because if they were awarded even the smallest amount of more time, she couldn't waste any pillow talk on getting him to change.

She was over the menus and her time waiting shifted to figuring out what was the final straw that took him over the edge. She wondered if him trimming his beard for her made him a little sad and added just enough distress to keel him over. Could it have been the Chinese food the night before? The coffee that he always made too strong? The customer that left without tipping?

In the midst of this never-ending train of thought, her daughters arrived with tear-stained faces to sit on either side of her. If it weren't

for the small circles on her back or the gentle grip of her hand, she wouldn't have known they were there. Her mind was too occupied trying to find that exact moment when everything changed. It didn't stop racing until a nameless person in scrubs emerged from the back, calling out for the Watson family. Her mind darted through every possibility, all the way up until the moment just after she had been delivered the news about her husband. Then, her mind went blank.

# CLAIRE LIN

## Mentor Charles Yu Introduces Claire Lin

*It's not that difficult really: you wiggle a little and you are there, in a different crevice of time. You close your eyes to the kid in the mirror and open to a face full of wrinkles. You lie down beside your lover, your cheek brushing against the pillows, and there you are again, five years old, hiding, waiting.*

— from “Treasure Island Alley” by Claire Lin

When I read, I listen first for voice. Voice is what draws me in, keeps me turning pages, stays with me after. Your instrument is your instrument; voice is the sound you’ve learned to make with it. It’s how you play. If the “how” is original enough, it becomes a new “what”—a novel way of hearing. An old song made new.

When I read Claire Lin’s work for the first time, I was struck by her voice: bold and free and assured. In Claire’s work, time and space are not obstacles but conduits, tunnels through which her prose, her eye, her mind move with ease, move with speed, touching down lightly on a moment here, a detail there. These moments and details accumulating into constructed worlds that are alive and weird and tactile, full of smells and sounds and particulars.

Claire is modest—it was from her husband that I learned of Claire’s academic rockstar status. (In Taiwan, graduating high school seniors take a national entrance exam, ranking every senior; on this test, Claire ranked first—not in her school, first in the *country*.) She has brought this formidable intelligence to her writing, and it shows.

But more than just having a big brain, what impresses about Claire is her thoughtfulness, which has come through our conversations,

in-person (back when in-person was still a thing) and, more recently, through computer screens. Claire speaks carefully. She asks questions and then asks more, and then more, always trying to learn, to observe, to seek insight. Not just “what should I be thinking about” but also “is this how I should be thinking about it.”

This self-consciousness, or self-awareness, translates on the page to a sense of restraint. At the same time, Claire’s writing can be playful. There is a clear willingness to try new things. I’m not sure how useful I’ve been to Claire as a mentor, but I have greatly enjoyed our time working together. I hope that Claire has gained confidence in her voice and will continue to make new sounds with it. I’ll be listening.

## Claire Lin, Excerpt from “Treasure Island Alley”

The mourning women are howling. Even with the window closed and her fingers in her ears, Xuan-Xuan hears their loud cries from the big white tent that appeared overnight in the alley. On tiptoe, she peers over the windowsill and looks down three stories to the long line of people holding incense sticks outside the tent. Each time the mourning women wail, the tent opens its mouth and swallows a person whole.

She is in Grandma’s bedroom. The smell of old clothes. Spittoon under the bed. She is in her family’s apartment building, 58 Hoping Road, Taipei, Taiwan. Mama made her memorize their address on her fifth birthday a month ago, when Mama and Papa took a rare day off from the family’s factory to go to the zoo, where Mama got so angry that her pregnant belly hurt because Xuan-Xuan strayed from the peacocks and without telling anyone went searching for the bears.

Cupping her fingers around her eyes, Xuan-Xuan pretends to scan Grandma’s bedroom with a telescope. The target is the top drawer of the dresser by the bed. That’s where Grandma hides money.

She notices for the first time a hole high up on the wall. Next year, a bird will fly through the window into that hole, and even after Papa opens a big chunk of the plaster, he won’t find the bird. It will take three days for the bird’s song to die, which Xuan-Xuan will remember years later, when she is old and has forgotten almost everything.

She stretches her arms high, but the drawer is two, three times her height. She plucks one hair off her pigtail braid and blows it afloat to invoke her favorite of Monkey King’s Seventy-Two Transformations: Size Enhancement. Then she breathes slow and hard and waits for her legs and arms to grow.

Long minutes pass.

Nothing.

Her hands still only reach the drawer where Grandma keeps a bunch of bras. Xuan-Xuan sighs. She has to watch again how Monkey King does it on TV in her favorite cartoon, but there is no time now. For now, she has to go about it the human way.

She swings one leg over the ledge of Grandma’s bed. Then another. Like a frog, like the fat, stubby frog that managed to climb out of the aluminum bowl in the kitchen this morning, but—*No!*—Grandma flicked it down with her spatula. *Where are you going? The wok’s ready.*

All morning, Grandma has been cooking a feast for the relatives. They are here to pay their respects, they said. Her Mama died last night

giving birth to a baby, her sister, they said. Her sister is coming home but her Mama will not, they said, but Xuan-Xuan has her own ideas.

She climbs on the mahogany headboard—it's surprisingly easy—and leans out to pull the dresser's top drawer. Grudgingly it opens, heavy and squeaky like a pirate's trunk full of treasures: gold earrings, jade bracelets, tangled pearl necklaces. She ignores them all and zooms in on: the Red Envelope. Inside is a stack of one hundred Taiwanese dollar bills. Sharp edges and clean smell.

Someone shouts in the stairwell. It's Papa.

*Ma, the Feng Shui master is here!*

Now Papa is thumping up the stairs and Grandma's slippers patah-patah, and then they are talking right outside the bedroom door. Xuan-Xuan grabs the Red Envelope, jumps off the headboard, and manages to land softly on the comforter. She wiggles between the pillows and tries to disappear. Then she waits, and waits...

A century passes. She grows old. When she is fifteen, she will give her virginity to a boy who makes her laugh. At twenty-two, she will move to the United States to study biochemistry. She will settle in Silicon Valley and for a decade, her startup will be her life. She will marry a white man with a boyish grin and a linebacker's gait, Alex, a venture capitalist, a judge at the startup competition that launched her company. After their divorce, she will become a staunch atheist in search of a religion. At a Silicon Valley Meditation Boot Camp, she will write down everything she knows about her mother, and it will all fit onto one page with room to spare. On the last day of her life, when she is one hundred and five, she will lie in her deathbed in an opioid-induced euphoria with her second husband by her side, and she will feel that her life has been lucky despite the sadness that is just beneath the surface of everything.

Time escapes from her fingers and hops, skips, jumps. It's not that difficult really: you wiggle a little and you are there, in a different crevice of time. You close your eyes to the kid in the mirror and open to a face full of wrinkles. You lie down beside your lover, your cheek brushing against the pillow, and there you are again, five years old, hiding, waiting...

Finally, Papa thump-thumps down the stairs and Grandma pads back to the kitchen. Xuan-Xuan puts the Red Envelope in her Monkey King backpack and opens the bedroom door a slit. Heat rushes in. In the kitchen, Grandma's silhouette shifts in and out of dense smoke. The

aromas of three-cup frogs and twice-cooked pork creep downstairs to their factory and heave upstairs to their roof deck, where they keep a German Shepherd going insane with old age.

Just yesterday morning, Mama waddled up to the roof deck while Xuan-Xuan was riding her new pink bike and Grandma was hanging bedsheets out to dry. The dog pawed at Mama, almost tearing her favorite blue dress that clung to her thin frame and swollen belly.

Mama handed Grandma the Red Envelope. *Ma, for this week.*

Grandma frowned. *How am I supposed to live on this?*

Mama rubbed the half-moon shadow under her eyes. *Perhaps... you should stop shopping at Japan Imports and Layaways.*

*You blame me? The factory's broke only after you married my son because you don't know how to manage money!*

Xuan-Xuan tried to get Mama's attention, riding the bike with hands in the air, but Mama was already stomping down the stairs and yelling, *Money! Money! Go earn your keep at Treasure Island Alley!* And Grandma was shouting after Mama, *Treasure Island Alley?! How dare you? You're the one who belongs in that hell!* Then the dog pounced and Xuan-Xuan flipped over, taking down the clothesline.

*Why is Mama so bad?* Xuan-Xuan asked as Grandma pulled her out of the tangle with the bedsheets and the dog.

*Good kid* was all Grandma replied, her face glaring like red hot coal.

Xuan-Xuan doesn't miss Mama, who never wanted to play, always hunched over a book filled with black lines and red ink, but Mama must have left because Xuan-Xuan sided with Grandma. On TV, she has watched Monkey King wreak havoc in Hell to bring people back to life, even erasing his own name from the Book of Life Expectancy to become immortal. If Treasure Island Alley is Hell, she will go there to bring Mama back.

# DAMIEN BELLIVEAU

## Mentor Chris L. Terry Introduces Damien Belliveau

One of the most annoying things about being a mixed-race black dude is having people tell you you look like someone else. Blake Griffin. Kid 'N Play. The guy from Counting Crows. Can't I just be me?

We're all different people. The catch is, if you encounter another mixed person, you often want to get to know them, because you probably have a lot of shared experiences.

That happened last year when I was teaching a class for Writing Workshops Los Angeles and Damien Belliveau walked in. We don't look alike, but if you described him, you might picture me: pale skin, tattoos, loose curls, forty-plus but dressed like a skater... Yup.

I immediately wanted to read Damien's work, but the class was a seminar on finding an agent, so I just got to hear it described. Damien told the class that his memoir *Hella* is about growing up in the 1990s Bay Area. While his mom was dating an alt-rock one-hit wonder in San Francisco, he was living with his grandparents in Daly City and getting to know himself as a black person at a high school full of strangers.

Damien also mentioned that he was applying for PEN America's Emerging Voices Fellowship. I thought, "I love PEN. It would be amazing if Damien got the fellowship and I was his mentor." And, well, here we are.

I'm pretty sure that I was more excited to get the news about this mentorship than Damien. See, he's already written a damn good—excuse me—*hella* good book. And he's got more coming. Me, I was finally going to read this memoir I'd been wondering about for months and dig into some of those shared experiences.

Damien sent me *Hella* and I kept doing the "I'll just read one more

chapter” thing until it was way past my bedtime. *Hella* is a terrific read, even if Damien wasn’t being honest in my class last year.

Sure, *Hella* is about the ‘90s Bay Area. I mean, fog is practically a character in the book and a certain Gen X rocker with a funny hat does make an appearance. But *Hella* is about so much more than that. It’s about a high-stakes search for belonging that feels never-ending when you come from a couple of cultures, when your family is slipping between social classes, when your family unit is constantly in flux, when you’re vulnerable and alone in a crowd.

Best of all, Damien’s writing jumps right over that “woe is me” tragic mulatto nonsense. It’s about finding belonging at any cost, by changing the conversation from your differences to your similarities.

Being told you look like some light-skinned celebrity is annoying. Jussie Smollett? Come on! But those comparisons are also a reminder that you have some kin out there. While celebrities are distant, you can keep a good book close to your heart. This year, I’m overjoyed to have read a story that I can carry with me, that expands and enhances my world, and to have worked with Damien to share it.

I can’t say I’m proud to introduce Damien, because he could have done this without me. I will gladly say that I am *excited* to introduce Damien. I’m sure that his work will make you feel like you are part of something, too.

## Damien Belliveau, Excerpt from *hella* “I Like Girls”

November, 1989

The moment I settled in to watch *Golden Girls*, the telephone started ringing.

I was thirteen and hadn't really started answering the phone yet, so the phone rang and rang until Mom picked it up in her room.

She said, “Hi Lulu,” and I turned my head and looked across the hall, anticipating the moment she'd call out to me to pick up the phone. I knew that this would happen because my mother only ever called this house in order to speak to me.

Lulu lived in San Francisco, but I didn't see her often.

She didn't own a car, and she couldn't stand to be in Daly City.

*Golden Girls* had begun. Blanche and Rose walked out of the kitchen and into the living room wearing pastel pantsuits, as they waved their hands in exaggerated exasperation.

Mom pushed open my door. “Damien,” she said. “It's Lulu.”

I stood beside my bureau and lifted the brown receiver out of its clock-radio cradle.

“Hi, Mommy,” I said. Since we all called my grandmother *Mom*, Lulu was *Mommy*.

Mom slowly backed away, pulling my bedroom door shut.

“Hey babe,” Lulu said. “How you doing?”

I told her about *Golden Girls*, and she laughed.

We'd only exchanged a few sentences when I noticed Mom pushing into my room again. She waved at me to come to her. I told Lulu to hold on and set the receiver on my bed.

At the door, Mom leaned down.

“Damien,” she whispered, “ask Lulu why she never brings a date to Christmas or Thanksgiving or anything like Lester's wedding.”

I was thirteen, and I'd never known my mother to have a boyfriend. But growing up, I'd always pleaded with her to give me a little brother or sister. She promised she would, but never did. So, like Mom, I was curious.

“But don't tell her I asked,” Mom said. “You just ask her like you want to know.” I nodded and said, “Okay.” Mom retreated, closing the door gently. I walked around my bed, picked up the phone, and said, “Hello.”

“Babe, what happened?” Lulu asked. “Everything all right?”

"Yeah," I said. "It was just Mom."

"Okay," Lulu said.

Then immediately, I asked her:

"How come you never bring a date to Christmas or Thanksgiving or anything like Lester's wedding?" For a long moment, I heard nothing but the fuzzy buzz of electrical currents.

"Did Mom ask you to ask me that?"

"No," I lied.

"You just thought of that?"

"Yeah."

"Well," Lulu started, "I don't really like boys right now."

"Okay," I said. At thirteen years old, I understood not liking the opposite sex.

"I mean, I don't like boys right *now*," she said, "which doesn't mean I won't ever like boys. It just means, right now, I don't like boys."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well," Lulu said, "I guess it means I like girls."

All at once, I understood what my mother was telling me.

A shudder ripped through my body.

This was 1989, not today, not 2020, and the idea that my mother was gay was so far outside of the norm that I was mentally and physically unable to process what she'd said to me.

The phone slid out of my hand and fell to the ground.

My eyes blinked about a million times, filling with water. A single tear broke free at the corner of my eye, rolled down my cheek, and slipped off my chin.

Moments passed and as the throbbing in my head slowed and quieted, I heard a screeching, screaming noise. I looked down at my feet. The phone was lying there, dangling from the brown cord like a noose. I picked up the receiver, and from some dark, guttural place, I uttered, "Hello."

"Damien!" Lulu was shouting. "Damien!" Lulu screamed. "Damien? Are you there?! Are you okay?! Are you all right?!"

"Yeah," I sighed.

"I'll be right over," she said.

Our connection clicked off.

I placed the receiver back in the cradle.

Sitting on my bed, clutching my knees to my chest, I faced the television. Blanche and Rose and Dorothy and Sophia argued in the kitchen about Blanche's trashiness and Rose's dimness and Dorothy's crabbiness and Sophia's oldness.

I felt pressure inside of me, and outside of me, and within each breath I took.

Mom knocked on my door, popped her head through the opening, and began to ask, “So, what did she —” and then she saw me and shrieked. “Beb!” she cried. “What happened?”

Mom grabbed me and tried to hug me, but she may as well have been hugging a corpse. “What did she say, beb, what did she say?” I shook my head, not wanting to talk if I could.

Mom spun away, slamming the door behind her.

Soon, the force of someone mounting our staircase rattled the house. I heard the front door open and close. There was a commotion in the hallway. Mom and Lulu were yelling at each other, but quietly. They were *hushing* at each other, which was somehow more upsetting because I knew they were trying to hide this violence from me.

I couldn’t see through the wall, but I knew Lulu pushed her way past Mom because suddenly she was in my room.

Lulu crawled onto my bed. She wrapped her arms around me. Our tears joined, slick between our cheeks. Our sobs found a common rhythm. We rocked back and forth holding onto each other like we were holding on for our lives.

And at this moment, I hated her.

I hated this woman, my mother, because she was here, and *Golden Girls* was still on.

In that moment, I finally understood something that I hadn’t before.

Since Lulu’s return to San Francisco, any time I told her I wanted to see her more often, she’d always produced some excuse.

*It’s too far*, she would say.

*Work is crazy*, she would say.

*She didn’t have a car*, she would say.

It was this and it was that and it was everything except the truth because when *she* wanted to be here, when *she* needed to be here, when *she* absolutely had to get here because *she* felt pain and *she* was scared, then she was able to be here in *fifteen* minutes.

Lulu held on to me, and I accepted the hug.

I loved the embrace while hating her because more than anything else in the world, love was what I wanted from my Mommy.

We didn’t talk that night. We held each other. Then we slept.

Waking up the next morning, Lulu was still beside me. Our day was beginning together for the first time in longer than I could remember. Lulu stirred, then woke, then immediately grabbed me and hugged

me. She kissed my puffy, salt-smearred eyes.

Lulu peeled herself away from me. She left the room and when she returned, her face was clean and her hair was wet. She dressed. She gathered her things.

“I have to take my friend’s car back,” she said.

Over the pile of blankets, I nodded and watched as she closed the door behind her.

I let my head sink into the pillow, my eyes dry and open.

I couldn’t cry any longer. I was empty.

# MEGAN DORAME

## Mentor Vanessa Angélica Villarreal Introduces Megan Dorame

In America, some of us are born to ghosts. Any attempt to know where we come from, our people, our culture, our ancestral tribe leads to dead ends, corrupted records, absences in the historical record that foreclose any knowledge or reconnection to our past. We are estranged from our elders and keepers of memory—sometimes by borders, sometimes by time, violence, or language, and sometimes because they have left us too early and taken their memories with them. So in the absence of historical record, of collective memory, of witness, what can the land give us? What memory of us still lives in the earth?

Colonized people are haunted people, and to write is to contend with an absence that threatens to disappear us into its forgetting. Our existence is the result of unknown and nonconsensual violences, erased from the official state record but carried in the body—a knowing that manifests as a kind of dislocated sadness, a longing for a piece of self that speaks sometimes through the land, sometimes through the tenderness with which we regard others, sometimes through ourselves.

This has been the central question of my newest work, a question made all the more urgent upon arriving to Los Angeles, a city currently occupying Tongva land. I came here to study at the University of Southern California and write a book about my grandmother, a survivor of intimate, colonial, and medical violence, and the pattern repetitions along my maternal line of abusive marriages, motherhood, daughterhood—one line in which our family's indigeneity feels close. But upon arriving here, I was struck by the daily violence against the poor in Los Angeles, against Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and immigrant

communities experiencing ongoing colonization in the form of displacement, gentrification, immigration and police violence, climate change. The city beckoned me to listen to it deeply, to take something in of all this darkness.

But it wasn't until I met Megan Dorame that I learned to practice communion with the land, to listen deeply to it and see the land itself as its own language, as a historical and manipulated entity that grieves and acts and resists. Where I saw land as a record, a counterpublic, a space of ancestral memory, Megan recognized this and showed me how she engaged with the land like family, her poetic language shaping itself around its rhythms and hymns and thrums of life, a perspective that plunged into the long memory of the earth and remembered underwater orchards of abalone, braiding rivers, echoes of language, the porous boundary between self, others, and land. But this is not to say that her work is in any way romanticizing or representing indigenous perspectives—rather, like her work as a Tongva language restorer, or as an indigenous consultant who oversees development projects and protects forgotten gravesites, artifacts, and monuments that are daily threatened with erasure and disappearance—her poems do a deeper affective labor of recording the forgetting, marking the erasures, making sacred the imperfect remembering, only possible through poems. I am stunned by the forms remembering creates in her pages, the precision with which she renders memory as tenderness, as body, as land.

The act of writing as communion with the land and its language is a powerful project of reparation. So I leave you with a small Tongva phrase I learned from Megan's work that I say to myself when I am feeling that profound sadness: We'aashar Chaavot. Oak / light. And I feel something like hope, like I cannot wait to see the world my friend, teacher, and sister Megan Dorame will make for us.

Megan Dorame,  
“what blood is the salinity of saltwater?”

salinity: salted earth

what currents  
the veins is soil  
soiled / soil  
dissolved in sea  
is a tired  
drowning  
the blood tug /  
the tangled root  
of dispossession  
sinks / the  
anchor a ghost  
mass / the sum  
of theft: this  
hollywood  
homeland  
glistens as a shell  
shelled / what  
shell will thrive  
in waters  
colonized warm?  
the tide licks the  
shore / the  
shoring longs  
for morning/  
the mourning  
reflects in  
wombs  
like mine that are  
salted

**salinity: dreamtime (blood)**

what is sown in  
b l o o d  
bound by  
c o n q u e s t ?  
the white walls  
of the mission  
are no place to  
be or birth / the  
one window is a  
t e a o f p i n e  
pitch / the thirst  
calls cells to  
s a f e t y / c e l l s  
r e m e m b e r p a s t  
foothills / the feet  
bolt / what falls  
between the legs is  
s a l t w a t e r

**salinity: abalone as amulet**

string through breath holes strung /on the porch  
as streamers of /protection  
shells clack /singing away spirits  
who /seek the hollow in us all /

**salinity : inherited drown amid another apocalypse**

what future exists where concrete river mouths speak only in dust?

what future exists where the pacific rises tepid /

the absence of fragments abound: the final acorn

ground

the final

abalone

plucked, suckled—

what future exists where auburn skies tell of fires made to hop free-ways? / we mask ourselves

from smoke / the virus spreads rapid, rabid biting the same soft pearls that ate my grandmother's lungs.

what futures exist where we progress despite our withering feet?

what futures exist where a baby is buoyed by saltwater?

**salinity : history repeats**

fissure my pelvis

with a tender knife / shuck the unborn

from shell / the precision of wrist digs / exposing a home for little feet

soles the size

of dew drops

prolific pulses plunge

a rhythmic descent

from body of soil

to tidegrave

**salinity : submerge**

(to rest on paper sheets is to dream underwater)

the suction of undertow  
pulls

(firm grasp, the nurse's hand, fluorescent lights, the focus of the faceless doctor)

breath held  
the suction of gut  
pulls

(my contradiction / my choice made)

the body's flail / the battle beneath  
the break

ers

(the instruction to stand / weak feet  
move, no trail of blood on the tile behind me, the recovery room is lit  
by a wall of windows)

(there, light gleams through green, the kelp, a forest, witnesses )

my futile

fishing

for not wanting

my futile

fishing

for wanting / to be  
a mother

**salinity : regret rot**

(my biological clock ticks on)

what is it about the flesh  
of the foot? its callous ways  
muscle attachment to shell

the paddle lags  
a mollusk's pace will swim me  
anywhere  
but to embryo

## salinity: abalone as reflection

look into my shucked /shell  
see the past or future /memory  
transports / vision  
through space and time  
to / reanimate  
the sacred /

## salinity: abalone as path

respiratory / holes placed  
on the face  
a shell / mask of sunset  
cups / the mouth  
the air we breathe will /  
be siphoned through  
the luster /

## salinity : abalone as body

shored,  
the spine unfurls into the shell  
of a red abalone  
the apex a shoulder blade  
a display of strength the fascia calcified  
counterfeit the most prominent  
strata a garnet  
scar  
the indelible blot  
of blood  
line  
dropped /  
desire / bisected  
by the gristle  
split  
of cervix

## salinity: listen

abalone sings / her voice is wind  
through breath holes /and when worn  
her voice / is movement  
that clacks the shells / in tandem  
with the body /

## salinity : portal

neuron channels unravel shame's  
face into sandstone      striations / it is time  
and wind that                      weathers the stone soft  
to lurch                              from such a lesion / the larva  
frees from the decay              it cleaves to root in the / the  
false ribs / breath lifts there /the breadth of comet tail orbits  
the spiral patina of  
possibility

## salinity : possibility

an entrance / an aura flare in the right eye / a tumble toward rocky  
shores / rerouted  
by updraft / recalibration to cliffed coastline / the feet land / with  
vision expanded / into alternative fields / of poppies

## salinity : repair

gilded            centers  
s p r e a d    p a p e r  
white            garland  
of    r o e    cracked  
i    n    t    o  
cast iron / with  
no    glow    of  
yolk    the    belly  
w a i t s / t h e  
w a t e r    breaks /  
s w a l l o w    t h e  
memory            clot  
to    dissolve    the  
n a u s e a    with  
the    tide    /    the  
lightseek is a dive  
to    unstitch    the  
pearl    from    the  
throat / to speak is  
to    suture            the  
bleed / what hides  
in the shadow of  
the teeth endeavors  
to be released

## salinity: forward

what salve spreads on the wounded to multiply? / the pearls march  
to the clack of shells to multiply / the shells embraced by flesh will  
multiply / clinging to concrete coast to multiply / the soil a rookery in  
us all / as soil / we sing the future from the saltwater

# M. KIGUWA

## Mentor Antonia Crane Introduces M. Kiguwa

M.K. was the last person I met at a café before COVID-19 shut everything down. I drank unsweetened coconut iced tea and sucked up her lavish opening chapters from a glowing screen. She glistened in an elegant black pantsuit. She looked like she had a hot date later, so I teased her about it.

She told me she didn't, but she said she's a bullshitter and I believe her.

According to ancient scribes, there's a Babylonian myth about a wily, brackish sea goddess, Tiamat, who has the audacity to defend her loud kids when they piss off Apsu, the male god of storms. Agitated about Tiamat's ability to create life and have compassion at the same time, a war ensues where Tiamat is sliced open—her fluids tossed into the sky to create the cosmos.

Such is the seductive lore of patriarchy: the telling and retelling of a salty battle of male dominance ending in the massacre of the divine feminine. Jesus, Zeus, Gamut, and Apsu all get law, order, and a blow job while twisting a creation story to suppress women's voices and drown out the fact of birth with fists and lies that hammer the ancient caves of our hearts.

M.K.'s memoir tells another tale: From the guts of a woman's pain, a world is made.

Her lyricism explodes form on every page, daring the reader to penetrate *her* creation story: an unstable political and personal landscape that is at once gorgeous and impossible to fathom. It can be felt and it can be beckoned like a serpent in a black sea, and yet, it is in this unrecognizably ripe space where M.K. is startlingly clear.

From the get, patriarchy reigns. Her grandfather may reject her cursed conception, but she spins a web inside his toasted pecan-colored skin and loves and loves and loves him. At least, her memory tells her this, in spite of his shame, Christianity, prayer, and the intricacies of hypocrisy, which M.K. knows like the dusty seeds of maize.

Upon reading sections of her work, I recognized an untamed sorceress of the sea in her prose. After all, *Here Comes the Matriarchy* swims from Uganda to South London to Rutland, Massachusetts and, like all sea goddesses, her senses transgress the material world, yet she never softens her focus. Corpses steam. Daughters and sons get raped by soldiers and everyone wears flip-flops.

Her poetic lyricism contains its own feminist magic-math. She speaks in tongues: One minute, she is Ugandan poetry, gospel chorus, and famine and the next, she's swiping cocaine boys on dating apps and betraying her benefactor. Impressed by her knife-wielding aunt, she writes, "Anyway, we are all mad." Indeed, we are.

In her travels from sex to God and back again, she never forgets that we come from a long line of witchy, healing women, sex workers, dragon mothers, and sugar babies—women with rivers flashing in our eyes—and that women like us are not meant to survive. And yet, here we are.

And from the raging waters of her skin story, the matriarch booms.

## M. Kiguwa, Excerpt from *Here Comes the Matriarchy* “Insatiable”

We agreed on \$3000 a month, lump sum. But just so we wouldn't have to discuss it again, we hammered out the terms during dinner—on the first of every month, he'd send my allowance through PayPal because that'd be easiest for him to remember—but, as he casually mentioned during our date, he didn't want to be bound by rigid rules around the whole thing. He was saying what he didn't want to say—that when he felt led by the spirit, he wanted to be able to spoil me freely, that the \$3000 was just where things started, but it certainly was not the ceiling of his affection.

By the time I got my first job as an executive assistant to a prominent showrunner in Hollywood, he'd already sent the first payment through PayPal. When I told him about the new job, I woke up the next morning to an email gift card for \$1000 from the Four Seasons spa. *Well done and congratulations. Thank you for making my grey life less dreary* was written in the message portion of the card.

Our dates were no less glamorous. A yacht chartered so I could see dolphins up close. While spending our day cuddling on the boat, I read him some nascent poems from a collection I still have yet to finish; he read me his mentor's poetry, the words piercing and visceral. Another night, we went to one of LA's popular restaurants. With celebrities and athletes buzzing about us, he ordered the entirety of the menu so I could sample it all. Afterwards, I told him everything about me—the even days in Rutland living with a stepfather who hated the sight and sound of me. The odd days in London staring at the train tracks, wondering how long it'd take to clean brain matter from the train if I jumped in front of it. He showed me his dark spaces, too—a cruel, abusive father who hit with words and fists, a mentally unstable mother who tried to kill him multiple times as a child.

We unraveled ourselves, the both of us revealing our underbellies soft to touch, vulnerable and tender. We were never supposed to survive, the two of us. And that we'd found each other, that somehow despite it all we both wanted to consider each other first—that, too, was never supposed to be our story.

After our dates, he'd kiss my cheek and slip an envelope into my purse. I'd count the money in the Uber home—always \$1000, his promise that I'd be well taken care of. That his care was a waterfall, the meat falling out of the broken husk of a coconut, a river flowing towards me.

Sure, I'd dated rich before, but never anyone this generous. Between my allowance, cash gifts, dinners and lavish dates—I knew it was upwards of \$7000 or \$8000 he was spending on me monthly. It startled me, this generosity, but even in theory, even before I'd met him, even before moving to Los Angeles, I knew about the power of creatrix. About the Beti women of Benin— those healing women who dragged themselves up a mountain and through a black ocean, their tide a bridge between calamity and peace.

I don't remember how I'd learnt about them—I was probably reading something obscure titled “Pre-Colonial Sexuality in Africa” or something or another—but from wherever I'd learnt about them, I'd also learnt that theirs was a secret council of wise women who gathered at night, during the harshest of times when stakes ran high.

It is said, the way secrets are said, that when rain refused to fall and famine kissed fledgling seeds of maize into dust, these women of mystery saw how people wailed into dry river beds and how people wailed into empty granaries, and when enough was enough was enough, they decided to pray. On a full moon, they'd climb together, slowly, steadily, up a mountain as dark as their breath, and upon reaching the top, would lie down in a circle with their feet inward, their heads exposed. They would chant and they would sing, and when it was time, they would pull up their dresses and skirts and touch themselves. Softly at first, but then harder and in rhythm, and as they writhed, they moaned, and as they moaned, they sighed, and—well, anyway—with wave upon wave of orgasm, together, in communion, they would leverage the power of their wetness, asking the universe, please, please take our offering. Theirs was not from ashes to ashes, dust to dust, but from water to water, life to life. They called this rite Mevungu where sex wasn't at the origin, no. It was more about the pull of their tide, the flow of their ocean.

Ours, too, pulled the tide and I happily would have given of my body, but my sweet benefactor was happy to court me in the traditional sense. Always a kiss on the cheek at the end of the night, always respectful, always chivalrous.

I wanted to give myself to him the way I'd given my body to random people over the years, from the sex parties I threw in my apartment to the people I'd messaged on Craigslist. From the guy two days released from prison, to the mother who made her kids sit outside the house while we finished, to the hedge fund guy with his loft in the middle of west London. To these people, I'd asked after, *Doesn't it get tiring? Do you ever get lonely?*

The convict responded, *Tsk. Don't be on no bullshit.*

The mother responded, Sometimes. Maybe you could hook me up with a guy you know?

The hedge fund guy responded, I mean, it's not as bad as the younger guys. So much money. Cocaine. New Ferraris. Fucking women every night. I'm not that, at least. But yes, it gets lonely.

I could have said many words to these three, or the countless others, but only to the one who survived things much worse than I, did I admit—cities are lonely. And even we who know the sweetness of living in the shadows, the birthing pains of art labored in anonymity, even we want to open our arms wide in the street, to be seen by both sun and moon—to be, as those wise *Beti* women—recognized and embraced by the elements. We are light, I wanted to tell him, but we are also sweltering and willful. Weathered and cosmic, pulsating and raw. We are perverts and holy, oaks and their roots. We are a river flowing, worlds entire, wounded magicians calling into the dead of night, please, please take our offering.

I never got to tell him these words. I only got his long email, detailing the ways he knew I was trying to find more men like him. Through dating apps, through friends of friends. But *I knew* he was also on dating apps, and so I wondered while reading, wasn't he also trying to find other women like me? Monogamy is a funny thing and men are comedians.

Still, I tried to remedy the rift, pretend I could be a good girl. Exclusive. Kept. But we both knew a wild thing when we saw it.

He ended things four months later. He said he had tax issues, that the movie he thought he'd be writing and directing fell through, that something-something cash flow had dwindled. I wanted to believe him, but I knew the real reason was he felt betrayed.

Me being me, I asked for a severance gift—one last PayPal notification for old time's sake. Three grand for the road. He sent it, and our rendezvous ended as quickly as it began. And how he found me is how he left me—thirsty and insatiable, walking in the dead of night, calling like those women from whom all wise women hail, praying to the blackness of the sky—please, please take my offering—and waiting patiently for it to rain.

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