



SHARD ATLAS

WREN AWRY

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For Tyler

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HENRY HUDSON SET ADRIFT

A classroom outside of NYC

The Collier painting's on page 83

of my 5th grade history textbook:

bearded man wooden boat looming iceberg

mutiny Northwest Passage.

Pushed out on the bay that bears

his name

to die.

A little boy curled against his black robes.

Maybe we were supposed to feel bad for Henry Hudson?

But we were too busy learning about Malcolm X

& I was more worried about the iceberg

than one of the men who conquered a continent,

part of a death litany written

in English Spanish French Portuguese:

Cabot, Cartier, Coronado,

Cortez Columbus

Vasco de Gama & Amerigo Vespucci.

Searching for trade routes & cities of gold as blood gathered

on their pale hands.

Even then, aged ten & one of the only

white kids in my class,

I knew to distrust their legacies,

riddled across the landscape.

The name of the diner where I grew up: El Dorado

The river: Hudson

The nuclear power plant: Indian Point

On rock beaches I'd watch rowboats paddle

cadmium currents

towards Manhattan skyline.

THE ANTHROPOCENE EATS THE MOUNTAIN

A deep- & surface-mined mountain in southern West Virginia

"One by one, the ferns have curled up their hundred eyes & curled back into the earth."

— Angela Carter, "The Erl-King"

Ring of stones, sedimentary thrust.

I came to the peak in the summer.

A view split between green & gray, but only one side crumpled.

The highest point in a low old place

// rendered lower.

I walked to the mouth of the cave. A small entrance, a shimmy in.

The size, maybe, of a giant's cupped hand.

Catalogued: Old food. Ziplock bag. Length of rope.

I ate a Powerbar mouthful of winter //

// bitumen // rotting wood.

As I chewed the earth shook.

Beneath my boots: chambered mountain,

hungry // swallowing // anthropocene,

hollow hollowed *honeycomb*

of abandoned underground mines.

Arsenic, selenium, lead.

Blue glass lamp, mud slicked boot.

Trilobites sealed in carbonate rock.

Mine flowers scattered

in an old coal seam.

SHARD ATLAS

Southern West Virginia (for Judy Bonds)

"Planted in our flesh these valleys stand."
— Muriel Rukeyser, "The Book of the Dead"

A scab, like a continent.

In the twilight, your face forward, almost riding horses.

Crumpled // too green // God's green // hills.

It all booms up behind the small man.

One // two // three it booms and booms.

Bituminous finger-paint on world-worn hands.

A scab, like a piece of agate.

You have come to the land of the no trespassing sign.

A Flemish Madonna's teeth strong against the toolbox.

The knife, deer, face-lines like mountain streams.
If you get lost follow the drainages, walk down, walk down.

We decided it would be a good idea to burn some furniture. We were young environmental hippies, and crusty old environmental hippies and a West Virginian. Sitting around smoking together and burning couches.

James Hansen's straw hat will save the world.

Priss Stratton will save the world.

Beneath the mountaintops, the bitumen.

A scab, like a golf course.

Maidenhair ferns and rhododendron vines, buckshot in autumn.

In the courts suited men discuss abstract gallbladders.
A hole that goes down forever and ever

into the core of the earth

will we ever find the end will we ever find the men

that stoke the fires that make this planet turn?

The plush dog is a ghost of a plush dog in grass that is the ghost of grass.

Freight train, pick up, lamp post, tabby, two tabbies.

This is a perfect world, this is the most beautiful world.

All the still and empty hoops and rumbling cars of coal.

A scab, and sometimes we cannot look.

An RC Cola is not available in this town. The union hall is not available in this town. The church is not available in this town. --Massey Energy

Let us clap and watch, clap and watch, and behind us almost heaven green hills, or a beauty line.

LYRA

A church & then an ocean somewhere, or maybe a hymn, a dream, a requiem.

#1

In the church of bones I scream your name,

recall what he said: *When I die, that's it. Swallowed by earth.*

I know he was right; hope he was wrong.

Hope somewhere a jar of butterflies waits for you.

I stumble over grade-school Our Fathers,

prayers to Mother Mary / Magdalene,

whisper:

*Lyra, Lyra you must live
on the other side of the wall.*

#2

Here: a sea. Here: a raft to sail across that sea.

It's all I have for you

CAST OUT FROM YOUR QUEERED FATHERLAND

I'm sorry that my hands are not boats.

I'm sorry that the waves are big and you are small.

Will it swallow you up? It swallows me up.

A raft-bed banging against a tide of ghosts.

NEON COWBOY

Fremont Street, Las Vegas, Nevada

Not boneyard yet not bones of buffalo
crescent ribs like old ivory bows.

Do you know that's how the West was stolen?

Well partly, anyway,

 ungulates strewn across the plains
foodstuff hunted to extinction.

& this, o you, o symbol, o capital, o capitalism,

 dust & red rock wrought in neon

& pings of penny slots,

a broken lyre upon the world's dark rim,

a million dollars in the back of Binion's,

 & Bon Jovi performing nightly

 on a ceiling that is not sky.

Darkness amid the endless lights?

Fremont Street in the morning,

 coffee soaking paper cup,

 burning thumbs.

Partiers: sleeping.

Panhandlers, gamblers: awake.

Bent-glass cowboy, filaments unburning,

 hat tipped as though

bone as though *buffalo*

as though he mourns

 the red mountains

that rise behind the Stratosphere.

A BORDER OF SKY

In 2011, artist Ana Teresa Fernández painted swathes of the Tijuana border wall pale blue. From a distance, these painted sections blended with the sky so well that the wall seemed to disappear: it ceased, for a moment, to be a barricade, a reminder that the Global North is fortifying itself against the Global South. Fernández's work reads like the fairy tales of my childhood, where the edges of forests are boundaries between known and unknown worlds. In those stories, borders function as thresholds.

In Ambos Nogales, where I volunteer at [el Comedor](#), an aid station and soup kitchen for recently deported migrants, the border wall starts outside of town. It's a rust-colored snake that wriggles across the hill crests before descending into the city itself. It cleaves the broad avenues and beige-brick buildings of sleepy Arizona from the narrow streets and tumble of vendor carts and pharmacies of urban Sonora--cleaves city from suburb, Mexico from the US, "them" from "us." On Sundays, families picnic along the fence, cousins with Mexican citizenship passing Coca-Cola and condiments to cousins with US citizenship, holding hands instead of embracing. The border here is porous enough for fingers, voices, shared meals; for lives to be lived across and between—but not permeable enough for whole bodies.

I'm a gring@ from north of the line; I live in a country where politicians and public intellectuals fuel fears that legions of people from Mexico and Central America are crossing north to take jobs away from US citizens and to, God forbid, speak Spanish while browsing the supermarket. In his poem "[187 Reasons Why Mexicanos Can't Cross the Border](#)," Juan Felipe Herrera writes, "CAN'T CROSS because 'xenophobia' is a politically correct term." *Secure borders!* US conservatives scream, and *Xenophobia!* the liberals respond--a cloaked word that doesn't sound quite as bad or honest as *racist*.

I also live in a country that elected Donald Trump to the presidency—a man who once said, "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best ... They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with them. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime." But those are not most of the people I've met and talked to: undocumented millennials who grew up in the United States, were deported, and are trying to get back to Chicago, Phoenix, or California; families fleeing gang violence and economic poverty in Honduras and El Salvador; a Oaxacan university student whose visa application was rejected by the Mexican government because he looked "too indigenous," and came from a family without wealth or social standing.¹

¹ Of course, there is so much complexity regarding who chooses to smuggle drugs across the border and why. As Carrot Quinn writes for the Guardian: "People crossing the border without documents are often fleeing [extreme violence, poverty and destabilization](#) in their home countries. They have few to no resources. They've often traveled thousands of miles already, through multiple channels, and suffered extortion and abuse in their long journeys, to arrive at the US-Mexico border, their one final hope to save their own lives and the lives of their families."

Herrera's poem also includes the portentous line, "CAN'T CROSS because brown is the color of the future," which hints at the dream that someday Mexicans, Central Americans, and other migrants will be able to travel north freely. Herrera and other writers and artists are making a new mythology of the border: Prefiguring what could be and should be, they transform the militarized line into a threshold. "I see a whole generation ... wandering around // a continent without a name," Guillermo Gómez-Peña writes in "Freefalling Towards a Borderless Future," "Standing on the map of my political desires // I toast to a borderless future // (I raise my wine glass toward the moon)." Queer, Chicana writer Gloria Anzáldua--who grew up in the borderlands of south Texas--considers the northward migrations a "return odyssey to the historical/mythological Aztlán," the original Southwestern homeland of the Aztecs which, according to Anzaldúa, they "left ... in 1168 AD," bound for the Valley of Mexico. "This land was Mexican once, // was Indian always // and is. // And will be again," she writes in her poem "El otro Mexico."

In October 2015, Ana Teresa Fernández and a group of volunteers painted a 50-foot section of the border wall in Nogales, Mexico the color of the sky. In April 2016, volunteers in the Mexican border cities of Ciudad Juárez, Mexicali, and Agua Prieta did the same. With each brush stroke, they enacted the project's name, [Borrando La Frontera](#). They offered those on the south side of the wall a vision of what they might someday see looking north--after the steel, barbed wire, and Border Patrol trucks that divide the two countries dissolve, there will be nothing but houses, schools, mountains, mesquite trees, clouds in a hot desert sky.

And upon reaching the border, if they have no money to pay someone to guide them on the long, dangerous desert crossing that lies ahead, they are sometimes offered a trade – [carry a bale of marijuana](#), and you will be guided across the desert for free. So the migrants carrying bales of marijuana are often the most at risk of all border crossers; they are those who have traveled the farthest with the fewest resources, those who are fleeing the most desperate situations.”)

BLOOD ORANGES

The US-Mexico border near Ruby, Arizona

The retiree gave us blood oranges
from his tree, a box
of wax-skinned rubies
 bouncing
in the back
 of the Dodge Ram.

I peel one for you,
toss the rind out the window,
into cholla & mesquite trees,
 cattle ponds & prickly pear,

split the sections & juice
drips blood, red velvet, jewels
down the tips
of my dirt-stained fingers,
truck wheels kick up
dust & cactus spines,

& I pass slices into your mouth--
which I think I kissed once--
 lying on your bed
your small coarse hand
 on my rib.

orange peels scattered
 on the dashboard
& lydia mendoza singing
 ni un muro quedó
on the radio.

this map of wounded desert

water gallons to be carted
deep into canyons
jostle in the truck bed,

a geography that's too red,
& in the middle,
a little ruby red.

NOTES & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The cover uses a Google Maps image of the US-Mexico border.

In 2009 and 2010, I worked on a direct action campaign to end mountaintop removal mining in Appalachia. The phrase “honeycomb of abandoned underground mines” in *The Anthropocene Eats the Mountain* is one we frequently used in our press releases to describe the hollowed out mountain that sits below the precarious Brushy Fork coal slurry impoundment.

Shard Atlas is based on a series of captions I wrote that correspond to photographs in Antrim Caskey’s *Dragline*. *Dragline* is a photo book that explores the fight against mountaintop removal in southern West Virginia. I also include a selection from an interview I conducted with an anti-mountaintop removal organizer.

The italicized lines in “Neon Cowboy” are from Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*.

An earlier version of “A Border of Sky” was published at *Tiny Donkey*.

Thank you to Susan Briante, Stone Marie, Alyn Mare, and Griffin Irvine for providing feedback on drafts of *Shard Atlas*; to early listeners, like Wyatt Welch; to Alison Deming, in whose class “A Border of Sky” was written; and to Margaret Killjoy, who let me run drafts of my cover past her.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wren Awry is a Tucson-based essayist, poet, and teacher. They’re an editor at *Tiny Donkey* and *Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness*, and they have writing at or forthcoming from *filmmakermagazine.com*, *Rust + Moth*, *Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness*, Fairy Tale Review’s *Fairyland*, *1508*, and *Essay Daily*. Learn more about their writing [here](#).