

*What Are We Doing Here?*

A friend recently told me he hasn't been able to write since the election. Over the past twenty years he has produced novels, stories, journalism, essays, and reviews in what seemed to be a steady stream, but now the whole enterprise seems futile. His head is muddled. He can't begin anything new. Like me, this friend is a dark-skinned immigrant. Trump's victory, fueled in part by white identity politics and racial resentment, swept away my friend's old certainties (or, if not certainties, then dearly-held hopes). In their place, something older—a mix, perhaps, of fear, sadness, and scorn—has returned. I understand where my friend is coming from. Since the election I've lost entire weeks. I don't sleep well. I'm not hiding in my house but now, when I go out at night for a drink, my wife (light-skinned, but also an immigrant, with a Muslim father) tells me to keep my eyes open. I tell her I always do. Both of us are glad we no longer live in Missouri.

Not that you have to be an immigrant. Anyone who is at all concerned about racial justice, women's rights, reproductive rights, queer rights, indigenous rights, the labor movement, anti-Muslim bigotry, the prison-industrial complex, public schools, clean air and water, the climate catastrophe, health care, child care, poverty, hunger, student debt, foreign wars, torture, scientific research, arts funding, or a hundred other causes must recognize that we are living through an emergency. The bad news doesn't stop. Of course, some tens of millions of my fellow citizens may view the present situation differently—just enough of them certainly voted differently—but I don't know anyone who hasn't felt, at various times since the inauguration, soiled, exhausted, and overwhelmed.

What, under these conditions, is the point of a literary magazine? Why write, edit, publish? Why, reader, do you read? Literature is not an instrument. The poems and stories that appear in these pages will not alter the political situation. Time spent with *Fence* is time away from putting your body in the streets, or calling your senator, or raising your middle finger.

I don't have an answer, only another kind of feeling. We fiction editors chose most of the stories for this issue in the late summer and early fall of 2016. Back then I was expecting another outcome. Fool that I was, I only wanted a dispiriting election season to be over. Looking back at these sto-

ries now, I can't help but think of how different life seemed a short time ago. But I also remember, when I read Aaron Coleman's rewriting of *Iola Leroy*, that nothing we face is new. And we still have experience, restraint, rhythm, and those blank spaces on the page that take your breath away. "Let the trees go. Let the secrets go. I can't let this skin go. I don't want to bloodlet home, go." What I would still give for an ear like Noy Holland's, who sings of beauty and love right at the edge of the abyss. "Like a beacon, such pain, a knuckle pulsing in the night." Osama Alomar, Syrian immigrant and Exiled Writer-in-Residence at Pittsburgh's City of Asylum, reminds us, like Beckett and Kafka before him, that we can always laugh at our own futility, even as we never turn away from the horror.

In rereading the fiction printed in this issue, I'm not consoled. I just feel more like myself. Aren't all these gestures—reading, writing, editing—also reminders that another life, an intimate life, still exists? I don't think it's escapism to reserve a space for gratitude. I will forget that truth, perhaps as soon as I finish writing this note and look at the day's headlines. So I will have to find a way back to remembering again.

It has been worse. It will get worse. Let's go on.