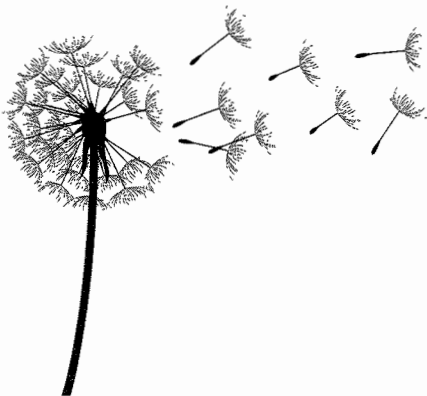


**AUTHENTIC VOICES ON MIGRATION,
SURVIVAL, AND NEW BEGINNINGS**

SOME WHERE WE ARE HUMAN

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AND
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& I Came the Way the Birds Came.

I

McAllen, Texas, is well-known for birds. The nine locations of the World Birding Center—a “World Class Destination for Birders!”—run along the edge of the Rio Grande, a flowing body of water where all kinds of migratory birds stop to rest during their north-south crossings. The World Birding Center, its website boasts, is “where you will *truly* find ‘A whole New Nature Adventure.’” The tab on “Bird Information” has a grid of birds and their respective calls. I look the most like the [REDACTED] but I sound most like the [REDACTED]. And Ringed Kingfishers—with their shaggy blueblack crests—have always been my favorite because they look femme and regal, and their eyes make me nervous.

Jennif(f)er Tamayo

II

In spanish the word *pájara*
the word for female bird

is also used as a derogatory slang
for a lesbian.

As in, *¿ella?*
. . . *ella es bien pájara.*

I learned this from another website.

III

My mother and I made our crossing at the very location where the birds make theirs, through the Rio Grande, no more than a few miles from the World Birding Center’s Hidalgo location. From what I’ve been able to piece together, [REDACTED] we made it to [REDACTED] somehow and then, after [REDACTED] under a car, crossed into [REDACTED] with the help of another animal, [REDACTED]. The path we took from Colombia through México and into the US follows the Mississippi River flyway—a migratory route famous for its lush deltas, rivers, and marshes. This region’s waters—the *Angry* River, the Mississippi, the Gulf—hold knotted histories of flight and escape. In the mid-1800s, Black captives used the Rio, the “bird paradise,” as a site of fugitivity. Which really means that: even before I was born, even before you were born, Black people were making pathways for our safety.

IV

The last time my mom let herself
tell me about our crossing
was a few years ago;
mid-sentence,
while on another topic,
she randomly rememb-

the *flash*
a *lightning storm*, scratching out our sky

¿Te acuerdas?

In these moments, she is ready
to let some of the story
leave her body
to take flight.
Her eyes kinda roll
upward toward the sky.
When we talk about it
—and we rarely do—
I turn into a chick
in her lap, taking in memories
bits of wet, ragged worm.

V

The World Birding Center is a place for families:
bird families & white tourist families. Admission is
\$5.00 for adults, \$3.00 for seniors. Kids are free. I
haven't been back to that area since my mother and
I were detained at McAllen's other famous structure:
the Border Patrol Station just a few miles down the
road. Built in 1921, this particular Station is one
of the largest in the region, patrolling fifty-three
miles of the Rio Grande border from "terrorists and
weapons of mass effect." The Station's jurisdiction
intersects with many of the World Birding Center's
numerous "bird" watching towers. It was at this
Station where a border patrol officer told my mother
to leave me, her four-year-old child. *Better for both
of you to be separated. Better treatment*, he told her, and
then, like a villain in a cheesy movie, winked.

When she releases this part of the story, when
it hovers in the air between us, I feel a lightness
inside me, as if I too would lift from
the ground and fly away

VI

This past year, my mother gifted me the wool sweater she wore when we crossed: an '80s big puffed-shoulder cyan and hot pink feathery soft thing given to her by my father who stayed behind in Medellín. Correction: gifted to her by my father who was *able*, who felt safe enough in his body to stay in Medellín. He was [REDACTED] but [REDACTED]. She tells me the story little by little, years, decades at a time, generations at a time—giving me the sweater is part of it. I think about what the birds wear when they migrate. What they carry with them besides a full belly. My mother brought the soft cyan sweater and a baby spoon for curling her eyelashes. And her child. When I wear it, its wool fibers tell me all kinds of stories. When I wear it, I feel *bien pájara*, ready to puff my crest, to be unruly and wild, ready to revenge.

VII

According to this one review on TripAdvisor, the best time to visit the World Birding Center is April. "Don't go in January," says one user. "NOT worth it this time of year . . . We see more birds in our backyard at home . . . VERY disappointed with this attraction." I think of this user and her family (from [REDACTED], by the way!) with their stupid little binoculars trying to catch a glimpse of a kiskadee from the edge of a watchtower. This *place* is their "attraction," their amusement park. I imagine them in their North Face puffer vests or camo gear. Looking. Looking. Looking at the lush valley . . . when suddenly the Prothonotary Warbler, a bright little songbird, flies beak first into their rotten eyeballs. The user shrieks, the kiddos caw, and a little trail of blood follows them to their Subaru.

VIII

More Google searches reveal, unsurprisingly, that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, part of the U.S. Department of the Interior, is one of the World Birding Center's key business partners. In fact, it was the Department of the Interior that funded their green-eco-friendly "award-winning" and—in my opinion—ugly ass tin can buildings. "Over 10,000 acres will be opened up," says the "About Us" section. "Bird watching is a booming national pastime . . . it's also B-I-G business." The World Birding Center is basically America. Acts of violence hidden neatly inside the language of care and prosperity. Choreographies of extraction, of land theft, of surveillance and policing disguised as a hobby, preservation, and ecotourism. For a small fee, *you too* can come patrol the border!

Sometimes
most of the time
these motherfuckers are so transparent,
I can't stand it.

IX

While I am writing this
a call from Medellín
enters:
my father.
I don't pick it up

because it's [REDACTED] to [REDACTED]
& I speak bird now.
I can only
squawk
and shrrreet shrrreeet
and caw-caw
and speak bird.

X

Hovering over the shoreline, kingfishers have a particular eye, their own unique browser histories.

The first and only time I've seen one, I heard her screaming call before I caught her dark oily eye in the branch. Her call cut through the space, and I could feel she was really strong, like maybe *too* strong. I wonder what bird calls we heard when we crossed; did kingfishers call out to me and my mother as we moved through the river? What were they trying to say to us? What did they warn?

Or, maybe, we were the warning.

XI

It is not only wool sweaters and baby spoons that non-Black, non-Indigenous migrants like me and my mother bring with us. We bring our selective colonial memories, our bootstrap habits, our antiBlackness; whether we like it or not, our crossing bodies participate in the process of settlement on both sides of this river. During COVID-19 quarantine, Afro-Femicides have been on the rise in much of Colombia. Women are literally caged inside the violence of patriarchy, of whiteness, of the State. Black Colombian women, Indigenous women are subject to a particular dispossession that migrants like my mother and I too easily lose sight of when caught in the trauma of our own crossing. I mean, would the officer have suggested separation to a Black mother or just forced it? Would the wink have been something more gruesome to a mother who spoke only Nahuatl?

I want to be the kind of bird that can love better, can love with more ████████ inside of all the violence.

XII

When I'm so angry, *so* angry—

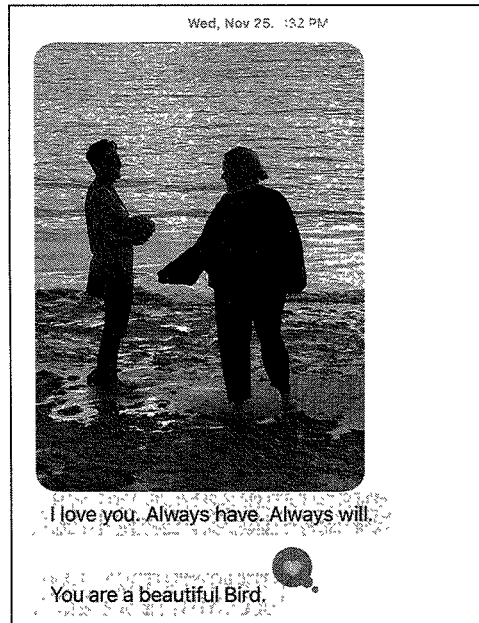
the flash

the lightning storm, scratching out our sky

*No. No
me acuerdo*

XIII

I force myself into a prolonged Google/Wikipedia spiral into the year 1921: the year of the Tulsa Massacre in Oklahoma; the year the United States and Colombia decided on the fate of Panamanian peoples by drawing colonial lines across our maps; the year congress passed the Emergency Quota Act to restrict “undesirable” immigration to the US; and the same year the McAllen Station was built from the ground up by just four officers. *100 years, the length of a long healthy lifetime.* And then I think that long before 1921 the Rio Grande, by other names, flowed through the Tāp Pīlam Coahuiltecan Nation. And, for many lifetimes before and many lifetimes after, that river will continue to flow. And the kingfishers, and cowbirds, and orioles will make their crossings at these spots. The bike trail will be disappeared by blades of green. The “Hawk Tower” will decay, grow covered in that pearl-colored bird poo. And the water protectors will dismantle the dams and watersheds that have interrupted the river's body. And that sovereign río will flow and those birds will loop around the skies as they've always done. And this shit, this American blight will all be over. Or, at least, become something else.



And maybe I'll become something else too. A new kind of bird, an unearthly bird. My friend Laila, who lives between El Paso and Ciudad Juarez, sends me a text message: "You are a beautiful bird." Can you see how the sleeves of my shirt kinda look like the beginning of a wing? Maybe I'll transform into a cygnet, feral and soft and queer. *Bien fuckin pájara*. I want to be bad, like the Bronze-Headed Cowbird, who will do anything for love. And did you know that the Groove-Billed Ani lays eggs in a communal nest? Imagine the warmth of that brood; the untrained dreams those little chicks must have together. Sometimes, I want to be a monstrous

bird with a bill so whetted it rips across space-time:

to a place where flesh is not a border between life and death. Like the blessed Rock Pigeon
 I want a long fucking memory
 an ancestral grudge kinda memory.
 I want us to remember that
 it has been Black and Indigenous kin
 who have taught us—over many lifetimes—
 how to take flight. How to orient ourselves
 toward freedom.
 And the land,
 it was her
 who made our journeys possible.
 We must transform
 into something
 else, something more [REDACTED]
 and more [REDACTED]
 if we are to plot
 our next [REDACTED]

SOMEWHERE WE ARE HUMAN

Author's Note: Details and direct quotations about the World Birding Center can be found at www.theworldbirdingcenter.com. The Bentsen–Rio Grande Valley World Birding Center headquarters received a 2006 American Institute of Architects Top Ten Project award—and cost “the state” of Texas \$3,500,000, not including the land itself, which continues to be owned by the settler-colonial empire. More on the history of Black captive escape through the southern border can be found in Russell Contreras’s article “Story of the Underground Railroad to México Gains Attention,” published by Associated Press News on September 16, 2020. The brief history of the McAllen Station and the phrase “terrorists’ weapons of mass effect” can be found on the Station’s U.S. Customs and Border Protection website: www.cbp.gov.

Jennif(f)er Tamayo is a performer, poet, and scholar whose writing and stage work reimagine narratives about and politics of queer, undocumented figures in the U.S. She is the author of the poetry collections [*Red Missed Aches, Read Mistakes, Red Mistakes, Read Missed Aches*] (2011) and *YOU DA ONE* (2017), and her latest prose-poem publication *to kill the future in the present* (2018). JT has received fellowships from the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts, the Arts Research Center, the Hemispheric Institute, and CantoMundo. Her work has been staged at the Brooklyn Museum, BAMPFA (Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive), Midtown Arts & Theater Center Houston, and La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club, among others. Currently, JT lives and works on Ohlone and Patwin lands and is a PhD candidate in performance studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Her research explores how contemporary Black and Indigenous poets use vocal and sonic practices to counter-narrate histories of colonial violence.

Javier Zamora

POEMS

Every election,

a candidate promises: papers,
papers, & more.
They gift us Advance Parole.
We want flight. “OK, then,
make some wings.”
We do. Some of us on the edge . . .
leap! Some watch others fly
& are scared. Others
are too old for anything . . .
The candidate wins,
the candidate loses, we fill more forms.
Consider marrying our friend’s cousin
whose business is 20k, 30k,
the easy way. We don’t—
because we think
flight will come one day. That day
someone will finally see
we’re not made of blue,
or black signatures alone.