

So There's That

*'O stand, stand at the window
As the tears scald and start;
You shall love your crooked neighbor
With your crooked heart.'*

W.H. Auden

*We are still America. We
know the rumors of our demise. We spit them out. They die
soon.*

Joy Harjo

The crowns of Japanese zelkova trees flash coppery light back toward the sun as it sets this autumn evening in Spanish Harlem. Down the block, spindly muscle woods still hold on to green leaves, the lone token of their vitality. Shumard oaks, the ones near the Washington Projects, cling to their canopies as winter quietly shoulders its way in. And on the corner, shadow falls early and deep over the bricks and the dirt where the store run by the Yemenis burned down that late summer night.

I take refuge in the change of seasons and light. Much of nature moves in these steady rhythms. We evolved as a species in this gentle rocking and sway, so unlike the recent convulsive course of human events. But we now live in a crazy Anthropocene mashup of political and climate change - amidst geological and galactic movement. So both the first chill autumnal wind and the lingering pandemic we let loose remind us we live in a natural world, a world that we have both harmed and to whom we must answer.

I am writing to you now, after the election. While world leaders have acknowledged the change, the revanchist grip of a defeated politician in his dotage keeps a nation and planet in thrall for now. At least Kanye conceded, *so there's that*. It is quiet up here amidst the national tumult, though, and it seems as if the city has been sleeping in after a long and restless night. In my office with a view clear to Third Avenue, I am trying to figure out what I see and what I might say and feel, probably just like you, dear friend. Sometimes, and in these times, I find sitting in silence is best.

So much has happened here beyond the election: we closed for a week after a positive Covid test from a teammate, and we reopened on Monday - the day before the voting began to be counted. We had no other positive tests from any students or colleagues, so it seems as if physical distancing and masks really do work. All of our noble and brave teachers and assistant teachers were present, and our in-school attendance and virtual attendance numbers continue to run way ahead of the rest of the city. *So there's that*. And we get out into nature, every day, to move in the changing light amidst all the russet and gold cast by the zelkova and oak under foot. While public schools are shuttered for who knows how long.

Winter is coming. Last week, as sharp winds edged the East River, one of our students, riding to school on the 6 train, was told to go back to Mexico by a group of white teens. Another student told us she was staying home from school because she worried about violence from the Proud Boys. This is something both old and new here in our city, this vile and viral ethnonationalism. How do you effectively explain that people's fear of displacement has been manipulated into hate? What can that knowledge possibly matter to a frightened child? I have learned long ago that simple knowledge can be crippling - or turn monstrous. And now, even anodyne facts seem to be up for debate. Memes with a megaphone are power, it seems. So it will be, until we create a school system where body, spirit, and mind are nurtured beneath these beautiful, frightening, and ever changing skies of America. Together, dear friend, in sunshine and in shadow too, we have already built such a school. *So there's that*.

Abrazos,

Ivan