

Autoethnographic Poetry & Art: Traveling Through the Apocalypse

Description

The AutoEthnographer





We noticed signs of climate change and felt a sense of impending doom, even as we witnessed how human beings across the continent are trying to keep alive

a sense of culture, art, and kindness.

AUTHORâ??S MEMO

The poems in this collection grew out of a cross-country trip I took with my husband in our 1981 Airstream Excella trailer after my early retirement as a college English professor. Iâ??d sold many of my belongings, as well as my house, and we traveled over several months from Ohio to California, where weâ??d both grown up.

Along the way, we stopped in various placesâ??a brewery in New Orleans, a winery in Texas, an RV park to visit relatives in New Mexico, Quartzsite, and the Salton Sea. At each waypoint, we noticed signs of climate change and felt a sense of impending doom, even as we witnessed how human beings across the continent are trying to keep alive a sense of culture, art, and kindness. I knew that we ourselves were implicated in these contradictions, burning fossil fuel as we traveled, seeing the effects of that travel, and experiencing at the same time a peculiar and perhaps impossible sense of hope.

For the last month of the trip, we stayed in the southern Sierra Nevada, where we own a small piece of land my parents bought in 1967. This land had originally been used for piÃ±on nut-gathering and hunting by the TÃ¼batulabal people, until the U.S. government deeded it away as homestead land in 1926. Surrounding the land are areas burned out in forest fires exacerbated by climate-change-induced drought, and at the center of it is a small 1959 General trailer thatâ??s slowly being reclaimed by the earth. I spent time while there working on the trailer and thinking about the land, trying to decide what to do with it and what it means to own it in the context of its history.

Throughout the trip, I found myself thinking about trailers, and how they capture something of the peculiarly American urge to travel, to be mobile, to go to the next place, and the next. We were doing that in our Airstream, andâ??at least at one timeâ??the little trailer on our property embodied that spirit, as well. Thereâ??s something hopeful about a trailer, even as we know theyâ??re by design transient and impermanent. Somehow trailers seem to be an apt metaphor for the place we find ourselves in at this moment on this planet: we want to move, to keep exploring, and yet our movement and explorations have consequences, and our conveyances ultimately betray us.

These poems speak from this nexus of movement and groundedness, apocalypse and rebirth, fear and hope. Theyâ??re both about travel and about returning home.

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Photo of author and her Airstream by Arun Jain

Almost the End

Signs of apocalypse show up
everywhere as we move
our aluminum trailer
through the landscape,
burning our own share
of fuel into the atmosphere:
broken houses in New Orleans
surround a breweryâ??s
attempt at Eden;
hunting preserves
in the Texas hills
beacon the wealthiest few,
with oryx and gazelles peering
through camera-watched
barbed-wire fences;
and methane hangs
in the oilfield air
of a New Mexico RV park.
And still we persist.
Still we try.
Still we rise early
to watch each
dayâ??s sun rise.

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Post-Consumer

So many houses,

so much furniture,

so many trucks

barreling by.

Iâ??ve stepped off the merry

-go-round, and even

if I wanted I could

never get back on.

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â??View from Walker Passâ??, watercolor on paper by Vivian Wagner

At the RV Park

We create a Fuzion here

between the Open Road

and the Sunset Trail.

We like a bit of Reflection,

as a Leprechaun does,

or a Puma.

In this Dynasty of Freelanders,

caught up in a Cyclone

of Solitude, we ride timeâ??s

Cougar, snowbirds

practicing elements

of Starcraft.

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Conservation

I saw egrets along

the highway,

nestled into

swamps, watching

over ever-

flowing water.

I want to protect them.

I want them to know

not that Iâ??m here,

but that Iâ??m gone.

Quartzsite

The morning lightâ??s a sheen
on mountains, covering
while revealing, shivering
the desert into existence.
We wake, feeling energy
blowing through us, knowing
that we, too, need fuel.

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â?•Sugar Loaf Peakâ??, watercolor on paper by Vivian Wagner

Sugar Loaf Peak

We climbed the peakâ??s

steep side,

looking down

at glittering lights

and miles of RVs,

campers, and vans,

scattered like

volcanic rock

through the desert.

This is how apocalypse looks:

not like an end

but a beginning.

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Where It Ends

Mountains encircle dry meadows

and fields of sagebrush,

whispering of stars falling,

ground eroding, fires spreading,

and somewhere in one middle

or another stands a tiny trailer,

rotting away into sand

that welcomes it into

rough arms.

Vintage

The trailer barely stands;
remembering through mice
nests and pine needles
what it means to be
part of the earth,
it tilts down.

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â??SKP Ranch Sunriseâ?•, watercolor on paper by Vivian Wagner

What Remains

piÃ±on nuts

flagstones

burned wood

broken trailer

memory of a trail

barbed wire

generator dug-out

dry air

dry air

dry air

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Landed

I dreamt something terrible
was happening, something quick
and loud, overhead, and I woke
in the small trailer on remote land
where Iâ??d spent what I thought
were happy childhood days
with my parents, before things
got as I now remember them.
Were there fights there, too?
Undercutting whispers, cruelty?

Or was I sensing something

earlier, when the nation

ripped this piÃ±on-covered

land from tribal hands

and squared it off into

homestead plots?

Or something in the future,

when the burned-out land will be

shrouded in mysterious haze?

My history and the landâ??s

converge, and that dream

itself is decades-old, now.

All I have is the still-

unaccounted-for

present, and the tireless

surveying of wind.

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Featured image, â??Sunrise in Quartzsiteâ??, watercolor on paper by Vivian Wagner

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