

**ALIETE GUERRERO**

## Autumn Damask

A Song for My Forest

The heavy rain woke me. There had been a cold front, which came down from San Francisco bringing flash floods, mudslides, and much nuisance. The city woke up a mess. It was 4:26. I turned on a small lamp to help quell the dimness. Silence, except for the faint humming of my Lenovo. The lights flicked for a second as if a blackout would soon take place. I didn't mind the cold, but I didn't want to lose power.

I logged onto Facebook and read an article about making pie crust. It said that there were “teachable secrets” that led almost infallibly to good results. The important thing was to have a method. I regretted not having one to make the dough for the molasses cookies my grandmother used to bake when I was five. My boys would have loved them, but I wouldn't know how to start. My husband, Henry, was a chef, and the kitchen belonged to him. He owned all the cookbooks, except for *Aphrodite: A Memoir of the Senses*, by Isabel Allende, which I had gotten at a bookstore in San Francisco that summer. It felt too late for me to start cooking, but I was taken by the literary aspect of the exquisite book. My favorite recipe was called “Madame Bovary,” a dessert made with cherries, mixed berries, and red currants. At least as a Brazilian I could effortlessly pull a perfect shot of espresso that delivered aromatics of passion fruit. No Nespresso in our house.

The rain intensified. The crackling of the fire expand-

ing the metal in the wall heater broke the silence. I turned a page in my *Smithsonian* magazine and began to read an article about stopping wildlife crime. The piece reminded me that Africa and Asia were reeling under a poaching crisis. The pile of confiscated ivory tusks cast a crashing sound. I could hear them being torn from the elephants with chainsaws to make ivory goods.

I was seeking a great sanction against poachers who were devastating my Amazon Forest. My grandmother Iracema was a daughter of the Aruaques, but encroachment made the city her tribe. In my house in Rio, there was a photograph of Grandma on the wall. She is dressed in a black, long-sleeved dress as though in mourning. She wears a cross necklace that doesn't fit her at all. She had been Christianized by her Portuguese husband and had grown solemn. She longed for her forest of staggering plants and mesmerizing iguanas. I promised her that I would never marry a colonizer, and I also promised that I would not forget the stories she told me when I was a child—they were pressed onto my skin, and impressed in my blood and bones.

When I was seventeen, I was in her forest for five hours, yet it seemed like a hundred years. I heard songs, the drums of my ancestors, their voices in shades of green, a green never heard before. The remaining Aruaques had to fight new oppressors, such as the Brazilian government—including a dam technocrats were planning to build near their reservation. Both Portugal and Brazil were merciless executioners of nature. Their mess was a crime against humanity. I could still hear a cry coming closer, blasting the silence that night, and promised them that justice would not be denied.

I clicked on my iTunes and began to listen to “Blue Train” by John Coltrane. The silence had been filled with warm and soulful music. Like Isabel Allende, he had a method, which made me wish I had one for going back in time and reading the letter my father wrote me five days before he died in Brazil. He called to say that he was asking for forgiveness through words he had measured carefully. The letter arrived in my mailbox seven days after his demise. I didn't want to hear from the grave, so I burned it. Was a daughter supposed to be folded, crumpled, bent out of shape? His colossal hands molded me into something to have at his disposal. What was the price of a daughter? Was the cost of a daughter epsilon? Was her value less than marginal? He had acquired me for basically nothing. I never

**CAROL GAAB**

*Silent Spaces in Between*, 2015  
Acrylic, collage, metal, rhinestones,  
on wood, 22 x 25 in



CREDIT: PAUL HENRI IMAGES

wanted to mend the ties that had bound me to him. I left his house, and took the road he would never walk on. My life was no longer a wrong turn, a dead end. I had blossomed into a red Autumn Damask rose exuding a subtle aroma of Indian Attar, golden-tipped, with a bit of a hard edge. I had an awry sense of gravity, and suicidal veins that burst open from time to time.

I touched the Stargazer in an indigo vase on my desk. She was beginning to wane. Her vivacious red and pink were tinged purple, the color of a bruise that takes weeks to wear away. I remembered not having a method for making the ones in my life fade fast enough. Some had lingered for decades. My father's encroachment was midnight blue, the same color of the ink I used to write him a letter saying that my garden of grudges against him had yielded the most stunning gardenia. She was thriving, although she required an acid soil, and protection from midday and win-

ter sun. I cautioned that she could have perished at any given moment.

The sun was up by the time I had finished reading the article on poaching. The rain continued to fall in a steady stream. It sounded like a brook except for the sound of an eventual car on Verdugo Road breaking the flow. Los Angeles was being flooded for her own good. I picked up my pen and began to write a song for my forest. I was free and unafraid. I had a method for that.

**Aliete Guerrero** is a Brazilian-American writer from Los Angeles. Her assimilation process has been tethered to a loss of cultural heritage, but through her writings she fuses her two worlds in a brand new universe. Her writings also reflect her passion for nature, art, and her struggles with bipolar disorder. Her memoir titled *The Tighrope Walker* is in progress.