

# spacecraftprojects

we are all astronauts

transmissions  
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## READING LAUREN BERLANT IN THE BATH

I am testing something, like a tongue on lemon ice in Italy in 1923, the year there was a crisis in Corfu; an assassination. What is a year? "I risk: lemons."

We drank lemonade in the pomegranate orchard, a bed-sheet spread beneath the trees. Nobody is dead yet, I thought, but soon they will be and with them go our hopes, our deliberate choices, the capacity of a nervous system to weather morning, afternoon and night. We are open, shining, reading, and not yet the person who would turn to leave, covering their face with a cloth against the bright yellow, pristinely grey sunrise that comes with climate change.

Describe the cloth. Refresh that face.

Year 47: I am writing by hand in another country. The paper is made of rice and tiny spots of blood. It is white and pink and it is made of flowers, hemp, boiled gold and ground up or powdered stone. "What kind of paper do you want to print your writing on?" asked Larissa Lai, at a lecture I attended despite my ambivalence about the broader curation. Three things: 1. The paper was more weighted than the content it received, 2. I was ambivalent because attending the lecture meant stepping into a cultural space, a department of English and Creative Writing, in which I no longer felt welcome, yet I wanted to support Lai, an Asian-Canadian science fiction writer, 3. Only emigrants write novels; immigrants rarely do. Is that true?

In the airport, I began to underline a new section of Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*, the book everyone read a year ago, quoting the famous line about "an object of desire" becoming an "obstacle to one's flourishing." Something like that. I read the chapter on Mary Gaitskill closely one day, in the airport in Qatar, underlining sentences as a way to block out the fact that I could not stop what was about to happen to us – my mother and I -- in India; nor could I. I could not prevent something that had yet to accumulate, though of course, it had. Is trauma a glass of water we carry from one generation to another, spilling a drop of it at our peril?

In Delhi, a dense, pale blue fog surrounded the airport. We exited in our stained cotton dresses, moving easily through the checkpoint. Nothing prepared us, inwardly, for the profound, distilled and terrible rage that met us when we came downstairs one morning. A sanitary napkin had slipped from my suitcase onto the floor, and it was there that my aunt's maid had found it. Post-Partition: a horror of the pelvic bowl. The blood on the boundary. What kind of family do you have? Did the members of your family live through a war? Did they see the ghosts of seven girls dancing and singing on a neighbor's roof? What is the difference between a boundary and a border?

My aunt said: "You are so selfish, so awful. You are a sick human being. What kind of filthy animal would leave a used sanitary napkin on the floor for someone else to pick up? The maid

said she will leave! The maid said she will not tolerate being treated like this! Don't you care about the pain in my knees? Don't you care that if the maid goes, I will have to do her work. I will have to clean the bathroom and the kitchen myself and then I will fall ill and then your uncle will have to take time off work and then we will lose money. You are awful, awful. Who was it who nursed your grandparents, not even my own parents, when they were ill? It was me. We lost all our land. I have given everything to your family, and this is how you repay me?"

I stood at the edge of the Kashmiri rug, hoping only to hide this scene from my mother, a very sensitive person, who was resting in the next room. I said, quietly: "It was not a used sanitary napkin. I would never do that. It's true there are pads in my suitcase. They are wrapped in orange plastic. One of them must have fallen on the floor. I am so sorry." I went upstairs to check; indeed, the pad was on the floor, un-opened. I came downstairs; a marble staircase, artificial flowers in lacquered vases, Ganesh -- copper and bronze and tin -- above the first curve. My aunt said: "You are awful. Look at you. When you got off the plane, you were wearing a dress. You dishonored your uncle. He could see your legs. You are so shameless."

In some sense, I knew this was coming and so, as I said, I read Berlant in advance, as an antidote, a language of the body written in another register and with another method. In fact, Lauren Berlant had invited me to Chicago; I am due to meet her for the first time, in a few weeks. What could I possibly contribute to the society of Chicago, a cosmopolitan city of philosophers and poets? In my mind, I see the cloth again and tear it with my teeth. I see the bed-sheet torn in half and "thrown over the two forms" outside Hotel 37. That is the part of my research I haven't completed. It's why I am here in India. To complete an essay on gender violence. To visit a site of violence so extreme -- the place where Jyoti Singh Pandey and her partner were thrown from the bus after she, Pandey, had been raped and gutted with an iron rod in December 2012 -- that it repeats something. What does? My mother recalls, vividly, the sight of women tied to trees along the border, their wombs cut out. 1947: borders are about fear, boundaries are about love.

No.

Some questions near writing: What kind of care is possible now? Or: How do you memorialize a stain? Here with my family of traumatized elders, I feel the blood and memory of my project drain out of me. My aunt can't assimilate the "unused" pad, the suitcase zip that did not fasten all the way. She screams. My uncle comes home with the milk in a soft bag. A year later he *whatsapp*s me from Oslo, where he is visiting his son. He says: "I will never forgive her for the way she spoke to you." But it's too late. Our family has been ruined. Our family is broken, tented, spotty, gone.

When the doors of the aeroplane click and my mother settles in, padding the U-shaped red pillow behind her neck, I open *Cruel Optimism* again. I am so attracted to Berlant's depiction of the artist-writer-activist in the closing chapter, "On The Desire For The Political," as someone: who is working at a different "kind, scale or intensity" to the "sovereign sensorium."

"Radically identified art so disposed tracks the affective ups and downs of the overwhelmed body politic, moving across exuberance and quietness." Lauren Berlant.

I take this to mean that dissent has a limit marked by health. What does self-care look like when it's staged? These are my research questions. There, beneath us, is the Thames, glittering like a pike as we bank north, towards Iceland.

No, it's never staged, it's never theatrical, I want to say. When a woman of color decides to take a very hot bath.

I am writing this:

In a hot bath.

Because I'm home.

I'm writing these words on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018, in Colorado.

The fire is orange.

I rarely took bubble-baths growing up.

Immigrants take bucket baths.

On a damp wooden stool.

Yes, I am reading Berlant in the bath.

Like a fool.