

letter to the formerly living nevadan from a former nevadan

by G. J. Sanford

i told them they remind me of you. that's right—
it's not just me anymore. now i'm left to wonder:
how much of us is left in the air when we've gone?
in the soil? if it takes fifteen years to leave a place, after,
how many marks are made? i carved many a symbol
of love into park benches (so convinced my relationships
were the perfect solutions to whatever crisis i was
experiencing), not to mention the bathroom
stalls where sometimes, just for the sake of it,
i took it upon myself to answer the timeless
questions i encountered there like *is it just me*
or is it getting crazier out there or *do you idealize*
the past or *see it as broken* with my own contributions
like *don't force it & be without rhythm, be without*
change & yes, i realize i'm stalling again—as in the art of delay.
you may have noticed the lines lengthening like they may indeed outgrow this whole thing
entirely. no, there you have it. a break. and here, i'll cut you one, too:
i have discovered there are no scenarios after leaving or losing
no experiences that can manifest which lessen the impact
of what's happened. & what happened? fifteen years
ago, you died. we were strangers to the waters
that suspended our bodies in that moment.
we are both still suspended there as i write you
from this distant coast, the ocean apparently the most
obvious alternative to the desert i could muster. everyone
i meet here says people can't move far enough north
these days. the fires will drive everyone upward before long,
some intone. they have bad things to say about californians
that remind me of how the folks in reno like to complain
about them, too, but i find it regrettable to know the trees
will certainly burn here should things get bad enough
as well. & when things get bad enough, i'll probably
join you; my whole family, too, who i've just found,
fifteen years after losing you. did i mention there's a kid?
just turned sixteen. *he* reminds me of me, & i pray
he won't stumble on tragedy the same way we did.
every one of us has arrived here via a circuitous path
of pain & i find it hard not to choke on all the grief
sometimes. but there is joy also in discovering the facets
of queer life & love together, & the air here is full of water,
so unlike where you & i are from. i remember tasting
the sun's radiance with every breath, & the dust
we'd kick up riding ramshackle motorbikes among

the sagebrush, reveling in a legacy of violence imposed
by our people on the inhabitants of that land, and the land itself,
which our people have never since sought to understand.
this was clear when i saw the petroglyphs, the handprints
& zig-zag figures worked into the crumbling sandstone crags
out by the hot springs. do you remember? we weren't supposed
to be there, and that's how it was the day i lost you. we should've
been elsewhere, anywhere other than where we were that day,
even if it wasn't falling in love or enjoying each other's laughter.
i would have been content with the most mundane moments
possible between us, had it meant you would not have passed
away in my arms that day, or that i would have otherwise
been able to count you among my family, you know, sometime
in the future, once everything had settled. fifteen years or so, apparently,
which i would have minded much less, i think, had you been with me.
i imagine the tree they planted for you in the park down the street
from our high school must be getting quite tall by now. i remember
when it was so skinny, when i'd check up on it every fall and spring
to make sure its leaves were doing the proper thing. i have always been
attentive, it seems, to the wrong things at the wrong times, such as
after all hope of seeing someone has faded into the aftermath
of their untimely exit from my life, once it seems like rituals of all sorts
fall short in reconciling the finality of whatever dreadful circumstance
with the need for connection each of us harbors in our animal hearts;
those wordless apes huddled beside dying fires in a growing darkness,
mourning futures they'll never know, promised lands they'll never attain.