

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Marsha de la O: "Northridge Quake"

Marsha de la O · Tuesday, June 14th, 2016

Northridge Quake

1

Not the stopped trains,
not the ants streaming out to read
the invisible, not the way the city
struggled to restore coverage
so the camera could zoom
the crack from chimney to base,
not the marriage of fire and water
as the main and the line crumpled
together with a sudden understanding,
not the clock face that grinned
and went numb at 4:31, not the jolt
of his body thrashing up out of sleep
as the flesh of buildings fell
from architecture of bone, no,
the wooden chest is as close
as I ever get to what happened.
First a lunging, layers and
layers of thunder. And yes,
the swell of a wave, water's
surge, a girl in a wooden chest
on the rolling seas, waves
not capped or foaming, chest
drifting. Then, the dead air
of the house when it stops
humming its secret mantras
and we're the only ones left
with our little scalloped breaths.
I've broken free, I whispered
to the dead air.

2

Mother described that chest
many times,
each with a suave dangerous

stranger, pocket full of sweetmeats,
 out there trolling
 in concentric curves, all the strangers
 she ever spoke of.
They all have a trunk large enough
 to wedge in a child's body.

3

She predicted our colors
 and postures
 in those chests, a phrase like
 cut to ribbons
 in the mind's eye of our
 dime store where spools of grosgrain
 with looped edges
 all pulled down wildly off their spindles
 and criss-crossed,
 wound about the children of the May
 cramped in their trunks.
 After the burning and cuttings,
 we might look like motley,
 like bright rags, like the stamps
 of foreign lands pasted
 one across the other
 in a hodge-podge of destinations.
 And the cigarettes would be
 welcome compared to
 other things.
 Oh, they lit us up in a way
 we could understand
 as she gestured
 in the air and mimed stubbing them
 out on child's flesh.
And then what, one of us would breathe.
They lock the chests, she'd hiss,
 turning an imaginary key,
 and throw them in the LA River.

4

Our mother could cleave
 to a tenet; our mother
 could hold a faith.
 For years we'd crane
 our necks, press our faces
 to the window glass, peering
 down flood channels
 where a trunk might snag
 on a mudbar against a
 stand of rushes.
 Never enough flow

to carry them out,
 but they must have wanted
 to reach the sea by San Pedro
 where the longest thoroughfares
 end in cliffs and refineries,
 and children can be lifted
 and floated west. Never returned.
 She made that clear.
 But eased somehow and carried,
 and I wanted that too.

5

Is there something to the stories massing in the atmosphere and the shape of a life? The way each shock wave lifted the barge of our marriage bed and gliding down into the trough, I knew I would have to leave him. The video only confirmed it; rebar orphaned from its cinderblock, skeletons left standing while fallen flesh invented itself inside the disaster. By the first night fever clouds had formed over the valley sifting musk on all our heads. It's ravishing, that sense that fate is upon us.

6

What else could it be
 but the workings of desire
 when, after the fire turns
 the hills to ash
 and the sky passes
 through its whiskey colors,
 the rains come, rushing
 down through culverts
 faster than a man can run?
 St. Francis Dam only needed
 a small quake—concrete is supple
 like skin, it suppurates, bubbles
 and bursts. Something slips
 inside you, nose down, the chest
 slides a watery slope
 just as though
 you are that child
 and free because you finally
 reach the sea.

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Photo of the poet by Alexis Rhone Fancher.

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