

## MELISSA GWYN

*Your Virgin Renewal, 2001*  
Oil on Panel 48 x 48 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## ALIETE GUERRERO

### Forest Blues

#### How Nature Saved Me from Depression

I went down Switzer Falls Trail in the San Gabriel Mountains of Los Angeles shedding burdens, looking for serendipity while paying attention to things of irregular beauty. I was a bit weary of the tidiness of the city's gardens where I often went on walks to watch things blooming. That Earth Day 2015, I wanted a break from manicured grounds where gardeners had shaped nature too much.

Before I went down the trail, I stood in front of the pink silk floss tree. She was at least thirty feet tall. She had a thousand blossoms covering the canopy, but was bereft of leaves. Her thick green trunk was peppered with thorns where she stored water for dry times. Although a native of Brazil, she could handle the dry-bone desert of Los Angeles.

I crossed the narrow bridge and began my journey downward. The terrain was full of pitfalls but of such great beauty that I didn't mind the danger of tripping over exposed roots, shaky rocks dotting the creek, or the zigzagging that led to obscure passages. I crossed over a thick tree trunk on the stream to get to the other side. It felt as though I was walking on a balance beam, but I made it to safety.

I took a step ahead and continued down the slope passing a couple of canyon live oak. They were striking with their trunks tinged red, but didn't match the beauty of the pink silk floss. I jumped over the raised sprawling roots of a California buckeye crammed with yellow blossoms. I continued down the path further and further into the trail. It became dimmer as I passed a row of redwoods. They had been defaced by taggers and their jackknives. I ran my fingers over the deep cuts and scars on those staggering beauties. They felt like the ones that had once bloomed inside me. Some were still bruised and could reopen at the slightest touch. I crossed over the stream again, stepping on each stone carefully to keep my balance. Some weren't anchored properly and others were wet and slippery. Some had been polished by the water and glimmered in the sun coming through gaps between trees. I continued on to the lower falls, passing a couple of old grills. A family of four was preparing to have a picnic. I thought of my own family eating alfresco in that beautiful landscape. We had visited the falls uncountable times when Gabe, Willie, and Chris were growing up. The children loved to splash in the pool formed by the trickling of water coming down the lower falls.



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There were signs of spring everywhere despite the severe draught in California. The orange poppies climbed up the slopes and spread over the bank breaking through the parched earth. The milk maids along the trail sprung up everywhere. A couple of monarch butterflies sat on top of the tiger lilies alongside the bank. Too bad, the butterflies' numbers had plummeted by thousands. Greedy developers were destroying their source of food.

I went around a couple of boulders and then passed a cluster of poison oak, carefully avoiding it, but intrigued by its jade-green, three-petaled elegant design. One truth about Mother Nature was plain to see—even her harmful elements brought a sense of harmony impossible to find even in the most well-manufactured things.

I went around fallen tree trunks and stood in front of the tall paper birch. She was hardy yet attractive like my silk floss tree. Her timber was used as wood pulp for paper making, that blank page staring up at me every morning. The tree marked the spot where my iguana was buried. I lost Sappho in the fall of 1995. She used to love it when I put her on a leash and took her for a stroll at Switzer Falls. She, as if by magic, almost completely disappeared by camouflaging and blending her shape into the tree trunks. She moved and reappeared. She blended with the leaves but I'd see her again. She was a good climber with her powerful toes and sharp claws. Her emerald green shimmered in the sunlight.

But once back inside her terrarium, she was restless, unable to withstand the Homeric isolation and the crushing memories of her forest. She was like my Grandma Iracema who never got used to living in the city. She never really fell in love with the glamour of Rio de Janeiro. She was a dark-haired beauty with flawless manners, but even

in a cosmopolitan urban setting, she was still a *curandeira* and used herbs, potions, and marigold poultices to heal the wounds of others. I liked to think that I had her healing DNA. My verses were my cataplasms and brews.

I crossed over the stream again to avoid climbing a huge fallen tree trunk blocking the way. On the other side, I passed a row of black ash and a cluster of western hemlock. I reached the end of the trail where the lower falls started. I looked around and saw charred remains of staggering trees burned in the great fire of 2010. Some of the oldest things in nature had been destroyed by the senseless act of an arsonist. It immediately sparked troubled emotions. A hundred past traumas rushed into my head.

I sat on a rock and breathed deeply. On Earth Day 1995 my life was charred by a great fire. There were cinders and wasted land left everywhere. That day, I opened the cupboard, grabbed a martini glass, and put it down on the kitchen counter. I mixed Seconal with cinnamon candies, blue barbs laced with blue Pixy Sticks, and benzos diluted in blueberry Kool-Aid and swallowed the highly charged cocktail. I wrapped myself in a purple shawl. It was the same color as the shrouds Mama used to cover the images of saints during Lent. I began to unravel. I was an unwounded spool of deep-blue threads of silk. I started to unfasten in rapid speed and fell into a spinning vortex. My red silk pajamas were crumpled, my hair tussled, and my nails undone. No matter what they said, not everything could be replaced.

I woke up a day later at the King Drew Hospital. They kept me in a small suicide-watch room. It was my own terrarium, except that there wasn't even a shade of green anywhere. It was completely bare except for a hospital bed, the light fixtures on the ceiling, and a small square window with bars on the outside. The off-white walls were naked. I didn't have a key that fit that lock. I came out of that dungeon two weeks later, unable to pull my loose threads together.

Sappho's demise made everything even more daunting. Emotionally everything was in shambles. Inside me, it was more like a basement where I had stored unusable things, discolored and fissured. I had Clarice Lispector's *Soulstorm*. The book demanded my full attention. It exposed me to a vital world far from the quotidian. Like one of Grandma's potions, it breathed life into me.

I got up and turned around. A few children were taking a dip in the pool formed by the trickling water of the falls. That shade of green reminded me that a few months after that great fire, we went on a healing trip to Catalina Island on a boat called *No Justice*. I saw the isthmus separating two bodies of water. I was jittery, too attached to the outcome to the trip to Catalina. I wanted to relax, let go, but the sea dictated the rules. It was edgy and choppy and the bay's water was of a clear and abrasive green hard to look at without having angry thoughts. She, the woman who fired me after I got out of the hospital, had eyes of the same shade of green. I dreaded her glare. She knew how to stare me down. She told me she was downsizing, but I knew well she couldn't stand the thought of me being institutionalized after a suicide attempt.

Down the beach, I saw a rock fused with a shell. It was a complex piece of nature hard to understand. Bipolar disorder was hard to understand. The stigma of mental illness was hard to understand. Later, a man in red swimming trunks came down the slopes and showed us the abalone shells he had caught. They were old things and he told me he knew their age by counting their holes in their translucent mother-of-pearl. The baby one, not fully developed yet, had two black spots in the center of the shell. They reminded me of blaming eyes. He gave me the one that was my age when I told him that I was thirty-four.

Later in the boat, my nine-year-old, Gabe, had caught a starfish. It had a half-eaten arm, but the dark-gray fellow was growing a new limb. I wanted to keep the starfish, but Gabe took it back and said, "It's not yours to keep. It belongs to the ocean."

I was disappointed. I wanted to snatch something out of the sea that wasn't given to me like tiger eyes, spider conches, and clam shells. It was just that the ocean had so much more power than me. I could have drowned in a flick of a second and my children too. The water tuned another shade of green, more like the emerald tinges of Sappho. It broke into ripples when Gabe threw the starfish overboard.

"Here's a shell for you my beautiful M-O-M," Willie, my three-year-old said.

I just burst into tears. "Thank you darling," I said. "I love it." I wiped my tears with the back of my hands. I had just remembered that my own husband had put me in that infamous institution and that I couldn't see our sons for

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two weeks. Then he claimed me later as if I were a baggage left unattended in a terminal. I had already made the decision to separate from him as soon as we had returned to Los Angeles. I needed to break free and figure out who I was.

I heard waves crashing at the beach, four yards away from where we were anchored. We went to the beach. There were lots of seaweeds in Catalina Bay. They were tough and impossible to untangle. Like them, my life was tangled up. I was tangled up. I shut my eyes and heard the ghosts of old shipwrecks.

The next day, it was the Fourth of July. I woke very early and went for a walk by myself. I had my abalone shell with me. I crossed the isthmus and reached the other harbor. I sat on a bench. It was the sea and me. That shade of green was the same of the peel of the cherimoyas I used to eat in my yard in Rio. The light hit the iridescent mother-of-pearl, displaying a myriad of lustrous colors. Too bad they were harvesting sea snails on a great scale. I wished they were less endangered. I wished I was less endangered.

Later on, I looked through the porthole in the cabin. I found myself face-to-face with the ocean. It was turquoise at one time, then viridian, than back to green blue. The new shades of greens cleansed my eyes of all unwanted memories. They closed some of my new scars.

After my return from Catalina that summer of 1995, I began spinning my own literary silk in long strings. There were a few messy threads and tangles. I also made sheets of silk paper and then made journals with strong thread for binding. My verses were asymmetrical and imparted



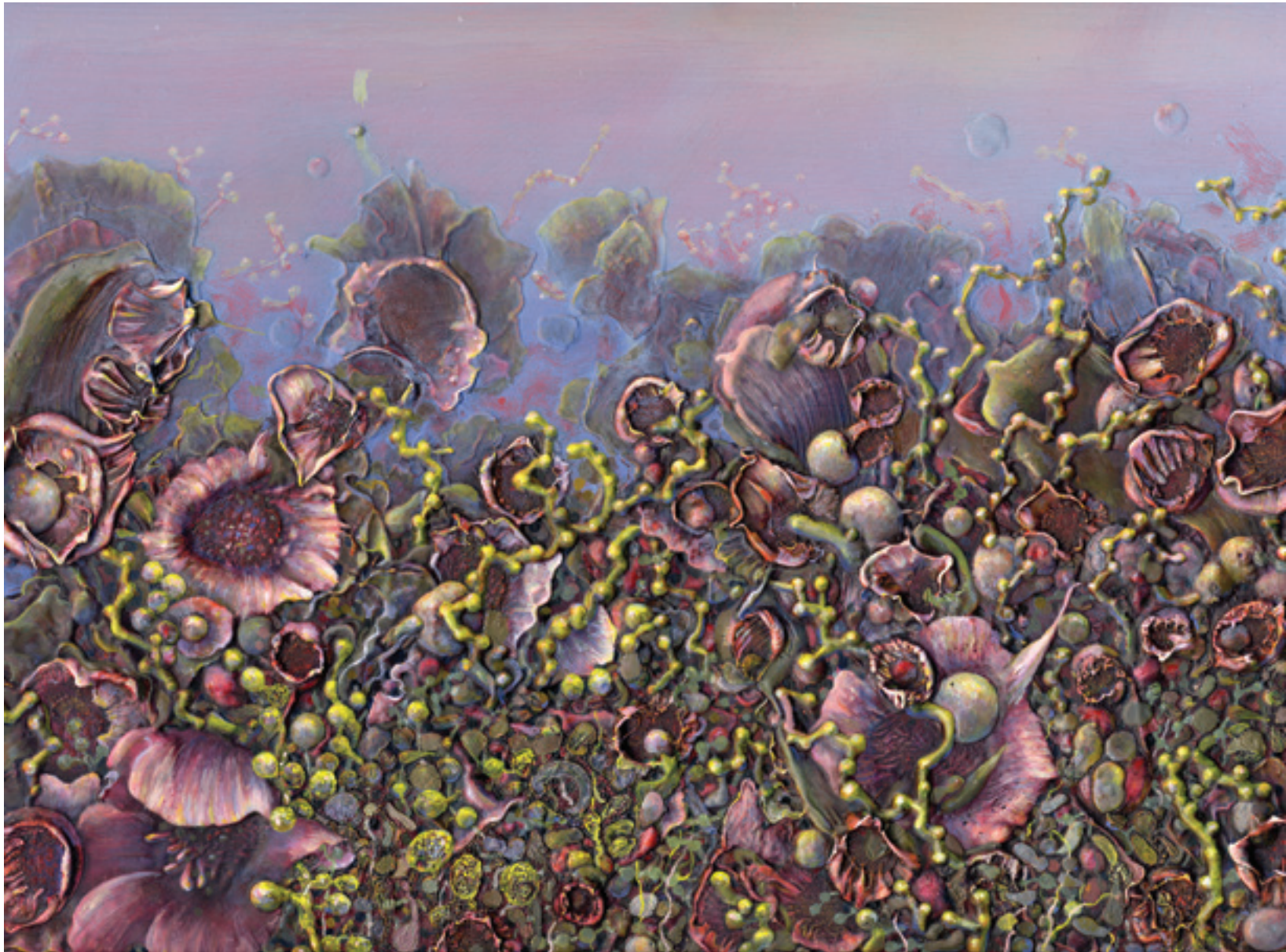
a beautiful crimson color to a flare, glazing the flame to a dazzling yellow. The blaze gave shape to formless emotions.

The high-pitched sounds made by children splashing in the creek brought me back to Earth Day 2015. I was almost done with my journey upwards. I was glad the lay-out ahead of me was asymmetrical. Nature was free and carefree. Even though a bit overwhelming, I knew my way out the forest like my mother and grandmother before me. At the top of the terrain, I reached the pink silk floss tree. I, too, could handle anything thrown my way. I had my own spikes to quell my thirst during the dry season. I and my tree were one. I collected a few seeds to plant in my garden. There were fewer and fewer messy strings. I put the seeds in my pocket and crossed over the bridge that led to the exit.

**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 Tightrope Walker* is in progress.

MELISSA GWYN

*Field*, 2011  
Oil on Panel, 9 x 12 in



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