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*“The fault-line here—the rift zone where Taylor lives—is on the ground between fear and tenderness. This duality makes [Rift Zone] so compelling, makes Taylor the poet for our moment.”*  
—Ilya Kaminsky, author of *Deaf Republic* (from his Introduction)

Dear Reader,

Tess Taylor’s previous book of poetry, *Work & Days*, was named one of the best books of poetry of 2016 by the *New York Times*. Now, with her extraordinary new collection, **RIFT ZONE** (publication date: April 7, 2020), Taylor presents her most powerful and timely work yet.

**RIFT ZONE** shows a critically acclaimed poet—known to many as the on-air Poetry Reviewer for NPR’s “All Things Considered”—at work on a one-of-a-kind endeavor, mapping a California and a country at the brink. Addressing issues of gun violence, homelessness, and climate change, Taylor reveals the fault lines, literal and figurative, in her Northern California hometown and our country as a whole. At the same time, **RIFT ZONE** is a deeply intimate and tender book about parenting, specifically about becoming a parent in a fraught time.

As **Ilya Kaminsky** writes in his introduction to **RIFT ZONE**, “Taylor understands she is living at the edge of what might be a great gulf, in the face of what might be called precarity—of her own life, of people around her, of the geologic earth, of the planet as we know it. To simply *recognize* this in America today is no small thing. To *write* the kind of work that actually maps this gulf is special.”

**Ada Limón**, winner of the 2018 NBCC Award in Poetry for *The Carrying*, calls **RIFT ZONE** “brilliant,” describing the collection as “a confident poetic engagement with the vital issues of our time, including the disastrous consequences of human activity on our climate, and its effect on the public and private spheres.”

MacArthur winning novelist **Jonathan Lethem** praises **RIFT ZONE** as “a haunting American elegy.” And **Edan Lepucki**, author of *Woman No. 17* and *California*, enthuses, “Taylor gives voice to all that the golden state has tried to repress and erase, and in these moving, beautiful poems she reveals the pain, danger, and beauty that persists at the edge of the world.”

Taylor’s poetry and nonfiction appear widely, and she chairs the poetry committee of the National Book Critics Circle. She was a Distinguished Fulbright U.S. Scholar at the Seamus Heaney Centre in Queen’s University in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and Anne Spencer Writer in Residence at Randolph College.

Please see the enclosed press materials featuring Ilya Kaminsky’s fascinating interview with Tess, as well as a list of sample talking points. Tess’s poetry will be incorporated in an exhibition, *Dorothea Lange Words & Pictures*, to open at the MoMA this spring—we’ll have more details to share on this as we get closer to the date of the opening. In the meantime, we can’t wait to hear what you think of this exquisite book!

Sincerely,

Monica Fernandez  
Media Manager  
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New from  
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*Rift Zone*  
POETRY BY  
Tess Taylor

An evocative excavation of a deeply fractured landscape, at once vast and granular, startlingly observant and relentlessly curious

*RIFT ZONE*, Taylor's anticipated third book, traces literal and metaphoric fault lines—rifts between past and present, childhood and adulthood, what is and what was. Circling Taylor's hometown—an ordinary California suburb lying along the Hayward fault—these poems unearth strata that include a Spanish landgrant, a bloody land grab, gun violence, valley girls, strip malls, redwood trees, and the painful history of Japanese internment.

Taylor's ambitious and masterful poems read her home state's historic violence against our world's current unsteadiness—mass eviction, housing crises, deportation, inequality. They also ponder what it means to try to bring up children along these rifts. What emerges is a powerful core sample of America at the brink—American elegy equally tuned to maternal and to geologic time. At once sorrowful and furious, tender and fierce, *Rift Zone* is startlingly observant, relentlessly curious—a fearsome tremor of a book.

**PRAISE FOR RIFT ZONE**

“In *Rift Zone*, Tess Taylor's brilliant third collection, we encounter a magisterial range of subjects, from the geologic to the civic to the intimately personal. This book is a confident poetic engagement with the vital issues of our time, including the disastrous consequences of human activity on our climate, and its effect on the public and private spheres. Rooted in the shifting California landscape, this elegiac yet hopeful book is a necessary addition to the corpus of work dedicated to grieving the world as we know it.”

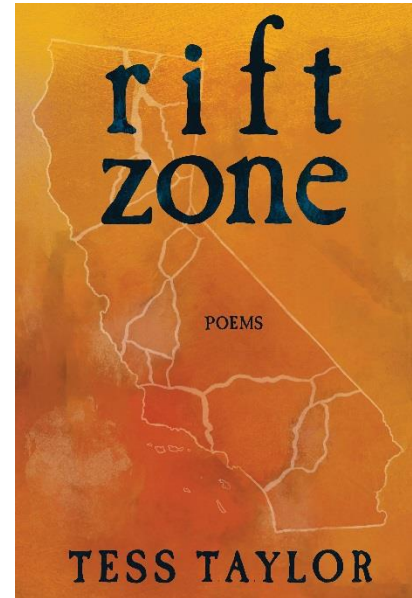
—Ada Limón

“The poet for our moment.”

—Ilya Kaminsky

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Tess Taylor's chapbook, *The Misremembered World*, was selected by Eavan Boland for the Poetry Society of America's inaugural chapbook fellowship. *The San Francisco Chronicle* called her first book, *The Forage House*, “stunning,” and it was a finalist for the Believer Poetry Award. Her second book, *Work & Days*, was called “our moment's Georgic” by critic Stephanie Burt and named one of the ten best books of poetry of 2016 by *The New York Times*. Taylor's work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Poetry*, *Tin House*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *CNN*, and *The New York Times* among others, and she's received awards and fellowships from MacDowell, Headlands Center for the Arts, and The International Center for Jefferson Studies. Among other things, Taylor is the on-air poetry reviewer for NPR's *All Things Considered*. She served as Distinguished Fulbright US Scholar at the Seamus Heaney Centre in Queen's University in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and was most recently Anne Spencer Writer in Residence at Randolph College. She grew up and lives again in El Cerrito, California.



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**MORE PRAISE FOR *RIFT ZONE***

“Reading Tess Taylor’s book as one sequence, which I highly recommend, is like taking a long walk with a vivid friend. Her voice falls in a steady rain of memory and witness, calling an entire landscape to life. Unearthing and sifting the seismic layers of her own East Bay locale, she’s created a haunting American elegy.”

—Jonathan Lethem

“Part natural history, part social history, part personal history, part prayer, the poems in *Rift Zone* are lit by a Northern Californian light that will both soothe and sear our hearts.”

—Camille T. Dungy, author of *Trophic Cascade*

“Tess Taylor’s marvelous *Rift Zone* burrows into geological, historical, and personal histories to grapple with what she calls “slippery California”, where instability is not only tectonic but political, social, and emotional--and from which no one is immune. Taylor gives voice to all that the golden state has tried to repress and erase, and in these moving, beautiful poems she reveals the pain, danger, and beauty that persists at the edge of the world. It’s at once regional and global, sweeping and pointed, an intimate epic of home.”

—Edan Lepucki

**FROM *RIFT ZONE***

From *Three Dreams 2018*

*You must always live on the brink* said Breton  
& so the brink cut through our backyards.

Most days it felt like nothing  
we didn’t think of the street as old seafloor

except when earthcrust would snag  
the foundations  
of expensive houses

suddenly upthrust  
like revelation—



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## TALKING POINTS

Tess Taylor, *Rift Zone*

RIFT ZONE is about both the fault lines of the earth and about the “faults” and “rifts”—including gun violence, homelessness, and climate change—in our community and nation today. What inspired you to address these issues? Did the act of writing poems about them deepen or transform your understanding of them in any way?

RIFT ZONE makes clear that there are “faults” even in a seemingly placid Northern California suburb. What made you center American violence in the Bay Area? How is California actually an epicenter of American violence?

RIFT ZONE is also a deeply intimate and tender book about parenting—specifically about becoming a parent in a fraught time. How do you balance the personal with the political when writing these poems?

Your previous book of poetry, WORK & DAYS, is largely centered around farming, working with the earth. RIFT ZONE is also an excavation of soil—of the fault line in your backyard. How did your experience writing poems of place affect the way you write the political landscapes that appear in RIFT ZONE?

You wrote portions of this book in Belfast, Northern Ireland, while you were a Distinguished Fulbright at the Seamus Heaney Centre, a position that started just after Trump’s election. Did living abroad—and in such a historically divided city—give you the distance you needed to contemplate the political and social issues in the United States? How did Seamus Heaney’s influence shape you?

RIFT ZONE is often indebted to geologic metaphors, and you gave some of your first public readings of it at a science museum and to a UC Berkeley geology class. What is the connection between science and poetry, and how might each discipline enhance the other?

In addition to writing poetry, you’re the on-air Poetry Reviewer for NPR’s All Things Considered, and seen as a spokesperson for poetry. You also write regular editorials for CNN. How are these modes of address—poetry criticism and editorializing—different, and how do you think each mode is uniquely useful for addressing contemporary issues?

You’ve also been writing poems about Dorothea Lange’s vital photography in California, poems that will be part of an exhibition at MoMA this spring. How are these two projects in dialogue with each other?

Your “Notes on a Diebenkorn” ends with the lines “Bright off-center longing / I always sense as home.” What is home to you? What is the importance of addressing the “off-centered” nature of the places we hold closest to our hearts?

In your poem “Song with Sequoia & Australopithecus,” you write that “we only half-grasp what we inherit.” In what ways does poetry help us grasp meaning in the world around us?

## Past Praise for Tess Taylor

### *The Times Literary Supplement*

[November 9, 2018](#)

“Taylor’s choice of the sonnet form and her repetitious rhyme scheme echo our own human attempts to impose structure on the natural world, especially where time is concerned.” —James Crews

### *The New York Times*

[December 22, 2016](#)

*Work & Days* book review

“The relationship between the writer and the green and growing world... is central to this patient book, and Taylor quietly derives as much sustenance from the uncertainties of that bond as from its renewal.” —David Orr

### *LitHub*

[April 13, 2016](#)

“The great thinker (and laborer) Simone Weil thought fewer acts more heroic than attentiveness. Reading these crisp, gleaming poems that sing of and are stained by “human remains” I fully agree.” —Adam Fitzgerald

### *Los Angeles Review of Books*

[January 17, 2017](#)

“Taylor’s lyrics are richly spare and compressed as seed” —Lisa Russ Spaar

### *Publishers Weekly*

[June 6, 2016](#)

*Work & Days* book review

“Taylor’s engagement with the poetry of agriculture reveals a deep sense of humility and a newfound gratitude for life itself.” —*Publishers Weekly*

### *Slate.com*

[June 9, 2016](#)

*Work & Days* book review

“It’s wonderfully carnal, that savoring that carries all the way into darkness.” —Jonathan Farmer

### *Barnes & Noble Review*

[June 28, 2016](#)

*Work & Days* book review

Her new book propels attention, seemingly, on a... lyrically gorgeous and formal level—preternatural lyrics about the cycle of the seasons, the metaphors of spirit and consciousness.” —Adam Fitzgerald

### *The Salt @ NPR*

[April 12, 2016](#)

Poems from *Work & Days*/feature

“in an era when distraction endlessly beckons from tiny screens in the palms of our hands, [Taylor] says farming can help reconnect us to the world.” —Maria Godoy

***Kirkus Reviews***

[May 23, 2016](#)

"*Work and Days*...is a book not of dilettantism but of great immersion, in both landscape and thought."  
—Benjamin Rybeck

***The San Francisco Chronicle/SF Gate***

[August 23, 2013](#)

*The Forge House* book review

"The most fascinating biographical fact about Taylor is not that she can trace her ancestry all the way back, directly, to Thomas Jefferson; it is her eloquent, thoughtful response to this grand lineage."—  
Carmela Ciuraru

***Oxford American***

[August 19, 2013](#)

*The Forge House* book review

"On their own, the poems are visceral, densely detailed, and frequently playful... Read together, in order, the details are illuminated by context and gain historical sweep."—Camille Guillot

## Conversation with Tess Taylor and Ilya Kaminsky

February 25, 2019

Originally posted to Poetry International Online

<https://poetryinternationalonline.com/10436-2/>



RIFT ZONE, Taylor's third book, is due out in 2020 from Red Hen Press. Her poems trace literal and metaphoric fault lines between past and present; childhood and adulthood; what is and what was. Circling an ordinary California suburb lying along the Hayward fault, these poems include redwood trees, hummingbirds, buried streams, and the otherworldly cries of new babies. They are also records of American unease, American violence, American grief. They include arson on the site of a Spanish landgrant, white supremacist violence, guns in the local elementary school and the painful history of Japanese internment.

In this conversation with Ilya Kaminsky, Taylor discusses the roots of the book.

**If you had to choose some lines from your previous work that echoed in your mind, in your inner-ear when you wrote this book—or perhaps the opposite (if it is more helpful), what lines you wanted to shield from, what you didn't want to hear, as you wrote this book— what lines might that be? I ask because I would like to explore that idea of mapping into the sound-work in your books, too. Not just content.**

I do see now how this third work, *Rift Zone*, communicates in overt and subterranean ways with works I made before. It's a book about core sample, about excavation, about digging. But I didn't know it would be this until the end, or near it. I rarely, if ever, think of former work directly when planning new work. In fact, planning is the wrong verb there, because when a poem or fragment of a poem emerges, it is a mystery to me—it emerges, I follow. It was only after the book was done, as it became clear that, in excavating the history of my hometown, my backyard—I could see that I was in dialog with concerns I had before.

Poems have their own lives, their own beginnings. They do begin in sound—fricative sound, little vowel songs. Sometimes they begin in absurd noticings: “I see the cleaners sign has now become the leaners” or, overhearing my mind reciting the names of the dead while I walk through the town graveyard. Yun, Kobayashi, Menendez, Revere. Why those names? What lives (and deaths) converge here?

It's as if suddenly I'm in the grips of something that feels as it must be part of a poem, and then it comes out on a notebook page; a bit of itself, as a start. But this is often fragment or shard, some demand or promise from the universe. It's only later that I see a constellation emerging, dialog between poems. Till then, I work out of instinct and baffled passion. Poems from this book were in progress for 8 years! The first poems came in the blurry months after I moved back to California and my first child was born. Perhaps the poems circling the suburb begin in the endless walking of the stroller around! Yet these poems also got finished in Belfast, while I was working as a Fulbright and teaching at the Seamus Heaney Centre—6000 miles away. These poems got finished in the years after Trump, in the years of our own wrenching open. How to sound that ripping? How do we read our pasts against this present? That also couldn't help but shape the poems.

I actually literally live on a fault line, one that is so near us, one that shifts uneasily, every year. I write “suddenly upthrust like revelation” to describe the earthquakes in the book, but I suppose it's a fair figure of mind, too. Maybe it's even a figure of politics—pressure, then revelation. The idea, also of “fault.” The earthquake seemed like a figure for our political time—an area under constant endless pressure which has a sudden, buckling collapse. In one poem I'm literally tracing out the deep meanings of the word “fault” – stumbling over them, stumbling over where the nubbliness of sound leads, those “bl” sounds making the mouth stumble too. The poem came out as an etymology poem, an ars poetica:

Fault we say & what is this but tendril  
to fault to foul a falling short a failing  
to blame to blemish  
                    e.g. a damaged place

the word also making visible  
at least in part the unimaginable  
moving plate: earthskull                      where it buckles

**I wonder if you could answer the above once more, but instead of sound, consider images. What specific images from your past work you were still haunted by as you wrote these new poems. Or, if it helps: what images were so persistent that you had to shield yourself from them as you wrote these new poems.**

Because I began these poems after moving home to California after all those years away- these poems felt fresh to me, built away from the other poems.

Everything seemed new—I had just crossed the country, just moved back into the suburb I was raised in. I had become a mother. Before that I was in Brooklyn and Virginia writing archival poems, and then working on a farm in Massachusetts. And because the California landscape was distinct, I kept falling through trapdoors of memory, thrown back twenty years just by turning a particular corner. Becoming a parent was also part of it. I remember looking at my tiny new primate and thinking how all of evolutionary time had converged in his body, how he was bearing the dark past of the species forward—into this odd, confusing, incongruous world.

How do we read that past against the present? This particular, very ugly present? There's a poem in there about a time a girl brought a gun to school and nearly shot us. My mind went over and over again my sorrow about that— for all of us, for her, for me, for this world. Then, I suppose, my desire to excavate. My mother is a historian! I guess that narrative is always in my head. I live now in a formerly working-class suburb. I live on land that was Ohlone, and then Spanish, and then Mexico—I literally



live on top of a buried stream which I hear in rainstorms. The figure of these alternate realities, their reality, stream's reality, the stream's bed—these were important to me too.

This town, the light on its walls, its little houses—in many ways a humble place, with small bungalows and lemon trees—a kind of post-war California dream. Dorothea Lange photographed it. Yet where is that dream now? For whom is it available? My suburb is uneasy in a new way: We bought the house in the years just after the housing crisis, as house tent cities began to bloom, and the Occupy movement was basically on our doorstep. The poverty has persisted. There are tent cities under every freeway underpass, it seems. Our neighbors are living under freeway underpasses. Our neighbors are living in tents. This is also a part of it.

**Another question: Auden, when he writes about Yeats, says “mad Ireland hurt him into poetry” What hurt Tess Taylor into poetry? Could you answer this question in terms of images, and sounds, what images show it to us, what sound keeps echoing that specific hurt, in your new book? in your past books?**

That line is so important. I think about it often. Camille Dungy and I have shared it—“Virginia hurt us into poetry.” Our families are both from there—a branch of mine was a slaveholding family in Charlottesville, hers an enslaved family in Lynchburg; we are likely some kind of distant cousin. We have both have written about that place, and its codes, and its violences. It's something we've talked about a lot over the years.

Part of the hurt is in inheriting a through-line back to that deep violence, of seeing how unhealed it is, of seeing racism spiral and tendril out to reinvent itself. Lawrence Campbell, a minister at a black church in Danville, Virginia, who was involved in the Civil Rights movement, and knew my grandfather said, “racism is like one of those weeds. you knock it down one place and it comes up some place else.” I suppose this book explores that “someplace else.” There's a lot of American violence in this book, but in it has tendrilled its way all across the country, to California. That violence is a highly persistent thing, it is the story, and even travelling 400 years into the future and 3,000 miles to the west can't quite rid us of it.

I suppose when I missed California from the east coast (especially in the winter!) I would think of it as sunglazed, kind of charmed. But when I returned here, I kept unearthing old histories of my hometown and decoding them newly, things I didn't know while growing up here, hidden just below the skin of my childhood. How this town was a ground zero for Japanese internment. How it has a history of Klan violence. Each of these things still reverberates with us today.

Meanwhile, Bay Area has changed—from being a wilder and more wayward to being so expensive and technological. I mentioned the glaring rifts between rich and poor, the savageness of our economy right now. But all of us live, insofar as we live, in precarious balance—downwind of fire, ahead of an earthquake, or health insurance, or somehow losing our shelter. Some of us have more buttress than others, but in every case, we are there but for fortune. A few years ago my husband was gravely ill and nearly died and could not work for quite some time. We are ok, but so easily might not have been. Recently we have weathered several devastating fire seasons, with friends losing houses, weeks of toxic air. I live a roughly middleclass life in the Bay Area. But daily I know this is a fragile miracle.

**And, a very direct, almost flat question: what is home for Tess Taylor—and what troubles you about building a home and raising a family in California, United States, in 2019? As you speak about that troubling moment—might you consider answering with images, sounds from the book?**

There are a lot of homes in this book. Some of them are the homes of place, of ecotone, of light, of species—the homes we make in tender proximity to the world around us. We have a redwood tree in the backyard—redwoods are these amazing, highly evolved organisms—their forests recycle more elements, molecule for molecule, than any on the planet. We have a broken national economy, but redwood forests actually are highly efficient ecosystems—a “wise economy” I think I call them, in the book.

Some of the homes are homes of memory. Some of the homes are homes of family, homes we make with the bodies we are trying to raise and protect in the world. When my son was born I felt so in awe of him—a being, alive at the end of this vast evolutionary and historic journey. Look at his tiny body! Look at the miracle of time emerging in this new thing! I also felt— it’s not his fault, but soon he will become part of the chain of it. The grisly past, the grisly present. He’ll inherit pollution, the super bizarre internet economy, whatever is left of democracy, and so on. He’ll inherit the plastic in the sea.

You’re asking me for images of home. For me it encompasses all these things: my tenderness towards my new primate. The solace of redwoods. My horror and sorrow at this violent time. The oddness of perching here at this edge of the world. These are the things that jumble in my mind.

**The book is filled with tenderness and fear, and there is also a very specific strain of grief in this book—an American grief. When we speak about literature, we rarely touch upon this — an American grief. It seems to me that grief for Americans, especially white middle class Americans, is always other people’s thing, other people’s trouble. I think your work points very much to the American grief. I wonder if you had only a paragraph, how would you phrase it, or show it, or sound it: American grief. That is, very simply: what is American grief according to Tess Taylor?**

You mention American grief. When I look for a way to answer this question I think of EM Forster, famously saying “only connect.” I often wonder about our ability to connect, to be human with and for one another, to be, as Gwendolyn Brooks put it “each other’s harvest; we are each other’s business... each other’s magnitude and bond.” Perhaps the grief is living in this society which, in failing so many people, fails all of us.

And: Only connect! Tech companies have tried to use that as their slogan, but what can foster the kind of conversation that touches us, changes us, makes us more open to one another, helps us open ourselves to reconciliation, to justice, to understanding? We live in an era of furious soundbite, of bon mot; where the very engines of conversation—I’m thinking of Twitter here—actually profit by feeding off and amplifying anger and discontent. Yet what will amplify our tenderness? What will amplify our sense of being responsible for one another?

We share this delicate, difficult place, these cities, our children, our planet. We share our fragile air. We share the oceans. Yet we are living in many ways in a deeply savage time, where all us who are paying attention are seeing such traumas to the bodies around us—through gun violence, through poverty, through brutality. One small example: Recently when I was riding BART with my son who is now seven, we saw a very ill and unhoused person, someone who needed deep care. This particular person’s affect was very poor, and it was painful to see, though I couldn’t immediately think what more to do. Afterwards Bennett told me that the situation made him sad. I asked him why and he told me “I am sad for him, but I am also sad for all of us that no one is taking care of him. That’s what scares me.” I think this gets at it somewhat. To be enmeshed in this society that abandons people, that so frequently

erupts in violence—even if one is privileged in that society, even if one seems to be surviving— does not allow us to escape its sorrow, or its threat. There is a grief that one must feel if one is to be a moral human.

**Your book gives us a vision of an American suburb. When you hear this phrase, “American suburb” — what emotions occur to you? And, what images and sounds from your work speak most vividly to those emotions? If you had to choose just 3-4, images/sounds, what would they be? Would they change from book to book? how? Why?**

Well, the book does start out describing the suburb, my place. Here’s a section of San Pablo Avenue a couple miles north of where I live:

San Pablo, old trade route, widens there  
peppered by papusa stands.  
Passes the crumbling mission and the corner

where Donte, who my sister loved, was shot.  
Blackberries choke the bike path;  
schoolboys squall like gulls or pigeons.

When you say American suburb, it seems like an anywhere, but of course I am always interested in very specific histories. In plant names. In specificities. When you say American suburb, American dream, American violence—well those things do mean something, but it’s also true that there are no ideas but in things. Under my suburb is Spanish conquest and a land grant, and genocide and also survival of the Huichin Ohlone. And in my suburb are paved over streams and small modest bungalows and lemon trees and lavender and rosemary bushes and this really strange wonderful light that makes the whole thing blaze to life after a rain. Down the street is the very crumbling bungalow where Credence Clearwater was founded with some guys from El Cerrito High. Why did they make that funny almost Southern son of a gun sound in California, on my street? Around the corner is where the Rosie the Riveters worked building ships in World War II. There is fog in July and there are frogs in October and even sometimes salmon in the few places the streams are daylighted. In the winter the light is bright tangerine, with these long persimmon dusks. Some of those things are deeply American, some site specific. I think it’s this jumble of violence and tenderness; of not being able to resolve those things; never quite being able to pull them apart. I suppose there’s some puzzle in that, some longing that emerges that makes me want to write. A faultline is under constant pressure, and sometimes that pressure makes itself visible. That’s a figure for American violence, but maybe it’s a figure for writing, too. And I suppose this is the moment in my life, in my hometown, when I wanted to do that writing. I wanted to name “what did I not know” that “was already happening.”