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Querida Palmdale

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Querida Palmdale

Alexandro Ochoa

*Behind the hamburger joint is the dead end
Where Tommy walks on crutches
Into an alley that meets us like a cross
When he sees us he waves hello;
We are all neighbors here tucked into the corners
Of the 110 freeways cement walls.*

-Cynthia Guardado, "Endeavor: Inglewood Just Another
LAX Flight Route"

"We are all neighbors here" writes Cynthia Guardado in her poem "Endeavor: Inglewood Just Another LAX Flight Route" (2017). This is how I feel when I drive into the Antelope Valley, a suburb about 90 minutes north of downtown Los Angeles. The Antelope Valley is where I grew up, more specifically in the beautiful little desert town of Palmdale. Nothing ever happens here and the roads are so wide. It's where people go to raise families, just as my parents did and perhaps one day so will I. Growing up I didn't put too much thought into my city, I just understood that it is where I lived and that there was a picture of an antelope on the outside of the mall because we were in the Antelope Valley. But it wasn't until I got older that I realized my city is a product of the white heteropatriarchy, a city that shares the history of many others just like it, the same narration of colonization we are used to.

The Antelope Valley once had antelope roaming around but were killed off when white settlers arrived in the late 1800s. Natives had been living with the land and the antelope for thousands of years before. When settlers were moving westward they were told that they would see many palm trees once they got close to the coast, but never seeing a palm tree they mistook the iconic Joshua trees of the area as palm trees and named it Palmdale. The native Yuhaviatam population was displaced as well, mirroring America's colonial histories. With the completion of the aqueduct Palmdale boomed, NASA moved in as well as the Air Force, creating plenty of jobs resulting in the expansion of the city. Rent is relatively cheap in the

area and is why roughly about 71,000 Antelope Valley residents commute daily into the greater Los Angeles area for work but don't actually live there.

The city is in the Mojave Desert and would not exist without the aqueduct. Growing up my father, being a gardener, always had the greenest lawn and the biggest rose bushes. Even now he complains about the water bill being too high, and well it makes sense, what doesn't make sense is trying to have a lush garden in a desert! But my family doesn't see this, they are blinded by the "American dream" of having a big house with green grass. Which is very interesting because sometimes it's immigrant parents who hold on harder to the idea of the "American dream" than white Americans do. However, these same ideas are how Palmdale was built; suburban neighborhoods, each house with manicured green grass, allowing my father to always have work.

I was in the In-N-Out drive thru and I noticed that the huge pine trees that had lined the drive thru my entire life had been removed and replaced with desert plants. I was angry, I felt betrayed, as if my city had taken a piece of my childhood and just got rid of it. Once the emotions passed, literally seconds, my logical side kicked in and I felt a sense of pride in Palmdale. Although it hurt at first to see something from home that I was so use to change in a matter of months it was nice to know that the city is finally accepting that we are a desert town and huge pine trees just simply do not belong here. This push to be more environmentally conscious can be seen throughout the city. Pines and large bushes that use to line old neighborhoods have now been replaced with drought tolerant desert plants. Green lawns have been transformed to desert landscapes, some now even have fake turf.

Aside from the landscape another prominent thing I remember from my childhood in Palmdale was how proud we all were about having NASA and Edwards Air Force Base there. I remember thinking how cool it was that we would always see fighter jets being flown and tested above us in the skies. How fun it was to be in a building and have the whole thing shake and the quick pause everyone felt not knowing if it was the start of an earthquake or a sonic boom from the nearby plant, it was usually a sonic boom. I felt pride in knowing that the space shuttle Endeavor was built in my very own hometown of

Palmdale. But I didn't understand what these things meant until I got older. The fighter jets that I thought were so cool are weapons of war, as a kid you overlook this. But they are literally killing machines, these jets serve as a means of maintaining Americas domination over the world. "Endeavor, why are you really here,/ to show us how easily/ we can be destroyed?" Cynthia Guardado writes in her poem: Just why does the spaceship exist? Why is there a museum of different fighter jets in the center of the town? Why did I attend an impoverished high school named after a wealthy homophobic white man? Now I realize how messed up it all is. But that's life, we are born into it not knowing why the things are the way things are we are simply born into it and take it for what is. It isn't until we get older and educated that we can begin to realize how these seemingly normal things take on new meaning.

Looking back now I realize that we resist by simply existing and by educating ourselves. I didn't know it at the time but the ultimate form of resistance that I could give *the man* was something as normal as graduating from high school. Me, a queer, first-generation Mexican kid graduating as a valedictorian from a high school that was named after a man who wrote proposition 22, the purpose of which was to ban same-sex marriage in California back in 2000. And yet I'm still here, growing in the spaces where they try to deny our existence making my presence in their space known.

Guardado, Cynthia. "Endeavor: Inglewood Just Another LAX Flight Route." *Endeavor: A Poetry Collection*. World Stage Press, 2017.