

Season One, Episode Eleven: Walking Through Fire: Poets on Teaching, Writing, and Staying Creative During These Chaotic Times

Intro: Welcome to Red Hen Radio, a podcast brought to you by Red Hen Press. We're a nonprofit publisher fostering diverse stories every year. On this podcast, you'll get to hear from the people who are inside the literary world — the authors and publishing professionals who are working hard to keep independent literature thriving. Stay with us as we introduce you to today's segment.

Kate: Good afternoon. It's afternoon here on the West Coast. I'm Kate Gale. I'm the publisher and editor of Red Hen Press here in Pasadena. Delighted to be here today with three amazing Red Hen poets. I was hoping you could each introduce yourselves.

Soledad Caballero: Yes. Hi. I'm so happy to be here. I'm Soledad Caballero, and my most recent book was published with Red Hen just like two weeks ago. It's called *Flight Plan*.

Kate: It's such a beautiful book. I hope that all of you who are listening will take a look at this book. It's absolutely gorgeous. It is in flight. Jose, can you introduce yourself?

Jose Hernandez Diaz: Yeah. Glad to be here. My name is Jose Hernandez Diaz, a local author here in LA County. My most recent book with Red Hen Press is *Portrait of the Artist as a Brown Man*. Glad to be here.

Kate: I've been following you on Instagram and following all your stories, and it's good to see you here today, Jose. Jason, do you wanna introduce yourself?

Jason Schneiderman: Yeah. Hi. I am Jason Schneiderman. My third book with Red Hen just came out last year, *Self Portrait of Icarus as a Country on Fire*, continuing the self portrait theme. I am also an essayist. My book of essays, *Nothingism: Poetry at the End of Print Culture*, just came out from the University of Michigan, Poets on Poetry series in March. And then in November, I will have a prosody manual *Teaching Writing Through Poetry* that will be coming out from Bloomsbury Academic.

Kate: I love to think about teaching poetry. I think all of you do some teaching, so I thought maybe we would touch on that. I wanted to start with you, Soledad. I know that right now it feels like a tentative time for many of us. We have all chosen to work in the creative arts and to be writing poetry, to be working creatively.

So I wanted to ask you how it is going for you in terms of writing, in terms of promoting this book, and I believe you are doing some teaching right now as well. Does it still feel exciting? Does it feel shaky? Like it's a wild time to be around? How's it going for you right now?

Soledad: I mean, is definitely a wild time to be around, I think. I use wild in its broadest etymological kind of definition. It's a sort of intense, simultaneously small to think about putting a book out in the world right now, and yet also, I think, an incredible act of radical imagination to sort of think about the creative arts and writing poetry especially as a kind of sustenance, allowing us to sort of remember the central core of our humanness.

Promoting the book, I'm not a great promoter of my own work. I struggle a lot. I love being in poetry communities, but I have a hard time sort of centering my own work sometimes. But I love the book and I love the idea of flight as a kind of metaphor for prospects.

I do teach. I'm teaching full time again after a year's sabbatical. Right? I'm a professor, a literature professor. And I teach poetry as a way to slow the world down in my class and make us really think about the possibilities that language allows us. And I think for students, especially that kind of slowing down and being immersed in the kind of gorgeousness and possibilities of language are really important.

Kate: That's amazing. At Red Hen, we just did an event with Maxine Hong Kingston. She said that for all of us who are writers, we have to keep writing during this time because it's our process, it's how we bear witness, and it's how we walk forward in the world. Jose, I know that you've been doing a lot of different things, so I'm curious how everything's been going for you. It feels like it's been a busy year for you.

Jose: Yeah, it's been really busy writing, reading, teaching, mentoring, trying to exist and go down my neighborhood without getting pulled over and family getting harassed and stressed out. And my part of the city, Southeast LA, is like nobody really goes here on vacation. When ICE comes over here, it's like the main focus. It's just an intense summer and a lot of rage, a lot of anger, a lot of fear, a lot of psychologic stress, and trying to write through that.

And I have been writing a lot. In times like this, the writing gets a lot more political, a lot of Kafkaesque, Orwellian themes. And unfortunately or ironically, it can get pretty productive during this time in terms of the writing. And then trying to just like teach on top of that, it can be hectic. Luckily, now, I'm teaching mostly online. I was at Tennessee last year in person. Right now in LA, I'm back in LA now. It tends to be a flexible schedule. My writing thrives in that lack of schedule.

Kate: I'm glad to hear that you are writing because, again, this is what Maxine kept talking about is that we're writers and we have to keep writing. So, Jason, I know you also teach in New York and that you have a very mixed community of students that you're teaching as well. And I'm sure that many of your students have been impacted by everything going on. How is that going for you between writing and teaching and everything?

Jason: I'm teaching so much right now that I actually haven't gotten very much of my own writing done. And I do find that teaching brings out the best of me. Like, if I'm at home crying on the floor or, you know, sort of unable to get out of bed or so distressed and horrified, teaching

can be a real blessing because no matter what's happening, teaching kind of brings out the best version of me. And I kind of have to be a really good self to be there for my students. A friend of mine this morning at her university in Philadelphia, which is a kind of an R1, their student population is down by 30% because of what's going on with visas and because American education is so heavily peopled with international students.

And so, fortunately, my classes are full, and I can go and I can kind of be the best Jason for my students. But, you know, when things are going on where it looks like people are gonna fall off a cliff because it's just not possible, we don't have answers yet.

Kate: It's a very challenging time. To us, it's very important to continue to serve the community, to continue our Writing in the Schools program, and things like this podcast, which we feel allows us to have conversation with the larger world. What I always say to the staff is what matters is how you walk through fire. So I hope we are doing so with grace here at Red Hen.

Break

Kate: I like to think that when you are talking with other writers and with other students, each of you has a couple poets that always come to your mind.

And I think that those poets change over time. The poets that you are reading and thinking about and that are speaking to you in some way. And I think that when we're young poets, there might be certain poets that we're reading.

Jason and I have talked about how when you're teaching young students sometimes they're like, *Oh, I'm really into Bukowski*. And you think, *Well, eventually maybe you will move on from Bukowski*. Nothing against Bukowski. He's a great California fun guy. But usually poets do move on from Bukowski.

But each of you has poets that you probably were reading ten years ago that you're not reading now. So I'm just curious for each of you, particularly right now, who you're reading when you wake up in the morning or when you sit down to think about doing a little bit of writing, who do you find yourself picking up?

And I thought I'd start with you, Jose.

Jose: Yeah. I was one of those writers when I was younger that read a lot of Bukowski, and I thought that was gonna be my favorite writer from my whole life. And I did move on from him as well.

Right now, I like to read Will Alexander linguistically, just read it out loud. Very fun to read, very experimental, very different from my own writing in terms of the vocabulary, but still both surreal.

Alberto Rios, I like in terms of the couplets and the form and fluidity. And Ada Limon, Harryette Mullen, Shivani Mehta, and those are the main ones. James Tate. James Tate is kind of what

influenced me into prose poetry, but I don't read them a lot nowadays, but always the original influence with surrealism and American surrealism. So those are the main ones.

I like to go back and read a lot of the photos that I posted online, and I'll read those out loud. Another one is Stephen Dunn. Whatever I shared throughout the week, I'll go and read that with some instrumental music and kind of just get in the zone. And I just wrote one like literally ten minutes ago, listening to Nas and New York State of Mind and the Beats. That's how I get it in writing mostly is listening to underground hip hop music, instrumental music, getting into the zone. That's kind of my routine for that.

Kate: That's great. At the last AWP, Harryette Mullen and Will Alexander were both on Red Hand's literary sponsorship, both, you know, poets that I admire a lot, and they're both just amazing in conversation.

Jose: I really admire that they both kind of go back and forth between the social realism and the avant garde. Mhmm. And I feel like I kind of do that as well. And originally, the original inspiration for that was LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka. He would do that with the beats and then also writing about the black movement.

I kinda feel that Harryette Mullen and and Alexander or more Harryette Mullen. Alexander's pretty strictly surreal. Nonpersonal. So I do admire that.

Kate: Yeah. Yeah. No. That's great. Soledad.

Soledad: This is such a hard question for me because I just I cut it in like, hey, wait. I don't have anybody now. Right? Because, know, you're sort of trying to put it all in your head. So my training is as a British romanticist, right? I have a PhD in British Romanticism.

So honestly, like I'm a Keats, like a fan girl of Keats. I love his odes. I love the sort of morbidness of it. I love the longing in it. Right? You can't do better than a lobbyist as far as I'm concerned and kind of that in sort of that way. So for me, I'm kind of like a home territory for me.

This past summer on sabbatical, I read so many different poets. And I think the poet that just recently there's two poets, Terrance Hayes, whom I just can't you know, I return to *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*. I return to that every year. Like I find that book the *American Sonnet* for me right now is pulsing. There's a vibrancy, and it's flexible and fluid and open. Right?

And so then, of course, I read Diane Seuss her book Frank: Sonnets. And then that kinda leads me kinda down this path to I like Ada Limon's voice. And I like, I did the Sealy Challenge for the first time ever like this August. So the poets that I sort of was like, hey, what did I really just kind of like work with? So Cameron Barnett is an incredible poet out of Pittsburgh. He reminds me a lot of Alison Joseph. Like the two of them to me sort of work really kind of well together. You know, my first love is my mother gave me at the age of 15 Pablo Neruda. And, you know, there's

a lot wrong with Pablo Neruda kind of like now in terms of his, you know, gross man parts or whatever. But to me, Veinte poemas de amor y una canción that sort of just works.

And then Gabriel Mistral. Gabriel Mistral, right Chilean poet. And I've also been reading a lot of Cecilia Vicuña. You know, she's also a performance artist, but she does a lot. In the last six months, I've read SABORAMI, and it's this kind of wonderful eclectic material sort of book. I kinda, like, vibe out on a lot of different things. I've read Jason's book in the last week. I reread Jose's book in the last week. Yeah. I like I'm a big fangirl of the two poets that I'm hanging out with right now.

Kate: They are good company. So when you were saying romantic, I thought you were going to go like, Carl Phillips, Li-Young Lee. I always think of the two of them as being sort of romantic, but you went a whole different direction. But yeah, that's great.

Jason, I know you're reading all the time.

Jason: I usually start my day with the Poem a Day from the American Academy of Poets. And, like, the Atsuro Riley poem that they had last week is just, like, blowing my mind, and I keep going back to that over and over again. And I love Atsuro Riley so much. And that was just kind of like, I didn't even know you could do that. So So that's sort of just I just been kind of staying with that. And I do have this kind of obsessive attention where I'm like more likely to just reread the same poem a 100 times, which is part of why I like to curate poetry series because then I get to sort of hear the whole thing and the author gets to select, I just discovered Meg Carney's work who I'm really enjoying. I really love Samiya Bashir's new book. *I Hope This Helps*. And it's sort of like, okay. Yeah. It helps.

I've also been going back to a lot of classics. I also have a PhD. And so all this stuff that I hadn't read that I always felt kind of guilty about. I was like, *no, I don't have to do this*. You know, like, *I don't need any more credentials*.

And so just things like Madame Bovary. I'm halfway through The Brothers Karamazov, and it's kind of amazing. I've been reading these, like, giant novels on my phone, so I have no idea where I am in them.

And so, like, I read Murakami's IQ 84, which I thought was just, like, mind blowingly wonderful. And I kind of like David Mitchell too for that kind of space of, like, the literary intersecting with the speculative fantastic or whatever nice word we're using these days for fantasy.

I also I do go back to Oddin. I do go back to Bedard. Like, I'll pull my click off the shelf and go back to the Wild Iris. I've I've had big, you know, giant selected, which I got for, like, \$5 on this roof.

Sigrid Nunez is just one of my favorite novelists. And so I finally picked up *The Vulnerables*. And while I was reading *The Vulnerables*, was rereading *The Friend* for a lecture. And it was just like I was like, this is what I need. This is the voice I need right now.

Kate: All great stuff. You know, whenever I'm listening to a group of smart people like you, I think, gosh. I need to read more. I need to read a lot more. I myself get a little bit buried with manuscripts as you can imagine. And so I need to unbury myself. But, that's what my colleague Piper is for, to help me with the unburying.

Jason: That's one of the hard I mean, you if you add up all the student reading that we do, if you add up, like, how many paper we're receiving, I mean, I could have read *The Brothers Karamazov*, like, four times in week four of the semester. But, yeah, like we're sort of called upon to do this like massive amount. And it's the same thing when you're editing. You know, you have this giant stack. And so sometimes it's bringing you into something that's doing wonderful. And sometimes you're like, can I please get back to what I lost?

Kate: Yes, exactly. There's something big calling you.

INTERMISSION: Hey, queer writers. Every year Red Hen Press offers the Quill Prose Award for queer writers. If you have a manuscript you'd like to submit for publication, visit redhen.org/awards for more information. You can also find the link in our show notes. We'd love to read your work.

Kate: Soledad, could you, go ahead and read us one of your poems?

Soledad: Yes. It's called "CV of Failures".

My blue wedding dress slung over a closet bar, still unwashed twenty years later. Old student papers stacked on the corner desk you pulled off the curb on a Sunday trash night in grad school. A pile of unread books on the nightstand. Ecosystem of neglect. I move them around every six months thinking it is about the order of the pile and not my life. I could go on. The size ten red velvet pants I keep in the back of the closet. Imagining even now, two decades later, my thick middle stump legs will fit into them someday.

There's a file cabinet drawer with long hand faded ink poems. No way to blow life back into them. They just sit, fester like insects after a storm. I could walk to the bursting garage in the back, bulging with neglected drills, rusted nails, earless stuffed animals. I could tell you about so many half lived projects and poems, books, murmurings, slutterings, ambling pieces, the decades this body bag of mine has dragged around on this world of Earth.

I could tell you about them all, but I don't. You have lived alongside my blood failures and star promises for years. You know the thick gristle of this midlife angst, My sagging sack of bones. My whole silly empty bits. And you, you dance around in the kitchen, beer in hand, avoiding my piles of life unlived.

Missed moments. Forgotten promises. You say come. Come with me. Come with me.

You take my hand. Force me off a couch. Out of the house and my miseries. We stand on the porch after the rain. It is brutal and humid and hot.

You say, see, it's not that buggy. You hold me in the heat. Sweat drips down my face. Bugs suck on my blood. And I fold on.
And I just think failing is really important.

Kate: Absolutely. Failing is how we learn and move forward in life. Wonderful. Thank you so much for that. Jose.

Jose: I'm gonna read the one I wrote today. I'm kind of excited about it. It's called "Prose Poem Written Randomly to New York state of mind by Nas", even though I'm from California.

A man in a chrisiano batman shirt walked in an abandoned city. Everyone was fearful of the government officials. The government had declared war on brown people because they are too loud or fight too much or crime or because they fear their language will dominate the world one day. But, really, the man in checano batman shirt just wanted to get along with everyone, including white people, go surf at sunrise, play basketball, have a Vietnamese coffee, have a California burrito, maybe some chicken teriyaki for lunch, wife fear, why think the worst possible scenarios. The man in a Chicano Batman shirt played his car stereo louder in his Chevy Impala 2021 contemporary psychedelic lowrider soul music to serenade the vacant somber city, an homage to the past, the future, the present, the galaxies yet discovered or denied.

Kate: Thank you so much. Thank you. Jason.

Jason: Since we're on a podcast, and I assume that I am coming to whoever is listening to us through the Internet, I thought I would read a poem about the Internet and intimacy.
"Clickbait".

Today's distraction. An article on how to avoid distraction. Turn off notifications. Clear your desktop. Divide things into what you are working on now and what you will work on later. Schedule the day. Use a timer. Reward yourself when you finish a task. Spoiler alert. It won't work. Remember the French wardrobe in which you only owned variations of one outfit to avoid decision fatigue? See, also ordering the first thing on any menu. See, also ordering the same meal at every restaurant. Question. Is writing this poem a form of distraction or a form of focus? Am I trying to avoid something more pressing by writing this poem? Or is this my life's work and the only thing that truly matters? Yesterday's distraction, an article about toxic productivity and the value of sloth. I like the word toxic and how now you can put it in front of anything. Toxic positivity, toxic masculinity, toxic futurity. What if after this poem, we take a break. I'll stop writing and you'll close this book. Not for too long, ten minutes, say twenty if you need more time. We can set a timer. We can turn off our notifications. It can be our asynchronous secret, something we did together that we've never even met, Something that brought us calm in a world that everyone agrees is spinning too fast. We'll make a little island where my only distraction is you.

Kate: Thank you so much. That actually brings me to the subject of my other question that I wanted to get to. I've been thinking a lot in the last few days about the effect of social media on all of us. The first time that it really dawned on me how much phones were going to affect all of

us was oddly 2011 or something. I was doing an event at Poets House. I was talking to the husband of one of the poets and he said, *you know, how do you think the audience will be here today?* And Li Young Lee was reading since I just mentioned him. I said, *well, you know, I hope it will be okay.* And he said, *what kind of distractions do you think there are when there are people at an audience?* And I said, *It's funny you should ask that because I've always thought that the distractions were, you know, people kind of looking around the room or something.* I said, *When you're at a place like Poet's House in New York, this is the church of poetry. I mean, what what art distractions are there?* You're in the room. You're in the church of poetry. But I said, *it's occurred to me when I came in here today and people started sitting down that everyone was playing with their phones.* You know, people were gathering but they were playing with their phones. And it was the first time I had seen that. Again, this was years ago, fourteen years ago. And I thought, *wow, there is a distraction and it's in their lap.*

So what I think about is now because of the influence of social media on the way we think, there was a time when what we thought was distracting people from reading and thinking was television. And, you know, no one talks about that now. No one's like, oh, you're watching too much Netflix or something. It's your phone. And clearly the influence of being on our phones for most people in America doesn't seem to be too good. People are making snap decisions and deciding who to love and who to hate. I don't do as much reading and thinking myself as I used to do. And so I am myself working at dropping the phone.

How do we as artists and creators, how do we move toward that? Maybe how do you work on this yourself? Would you agree with me that the influence of too much social media is not a good thing? How are you navigating this yourself?

Jose: Yeah, I think that's just a societal problem in general as well, not just with poets, but, you know, when I was in junior high, I was already logging onto my AIM and messaging all my friends. And then it went to MySpace and then it went to Facebook, Twitter. So we, we just grew up with social media since we were adolescents and it was just addicting. And I think it's affected the attention span. Also just affected in terms of wanting to get approval and liked and comparing and professional jealousy and publications. So it's there, but I think it's there everywhere, not just with my, my mother is 70 years old and she's obsessed with videos on the phone, you know? So I think it's everywhere.

So what I do is I balance time for, for writing and usually in the morning, a lot of, reading in Spanish as well out loud. So I try to read often in the morning out loud and then also give give myself time for for leisure of sports. I like to mix in sports so that I'm not just thinking about, you know, existentialism all day or poetry or surrealism. But if I'm teaching with a set schedule, that usually helps me because it gives me more direction. And the hardest part for me is when I'm working independently, giving myself that discipline of structure. So my whole life, I kind of thrived as an artist without structure and being very minimalist and anti capitalist. And I never really cared about having possessions or, like, I've always just been kind of on the on the underground avant garde tip. There's good things in social media, like all the jobs that I get offered with University of Tennessee, UC Riverside. I didn't even apply for it. They just reached

out to me via social media. So I think if they see if you have a large social media presence, that's going to help them get students to apply to their program. You know, I got like 30,000 on Twitter. There's good things and it can be very addictive and it's just a matter of trying to balance it out.

And it does always feel good when you get off of the internet for a while. But I've never been the type that had such a like cookie cutter life that I was, you know, I kind of like on the counterculture rock and roll vibe my whole life. So for me, the hardest part has been structure and things like that. I kind of thrive without set schedules. And a lot of my writing mimics that the internet obsessed times we live in where everything's kind of fractured and almost like a, like a Joycean novel where it's like collage, nonlinear, organized chaos.

Kate: I like that. Soledad, what would you have to say?

Soledad: I think I'm very grateful that I actually didn't grow. I'm old. Like I'm 52. So like I'm very gen x. I was just having this conversation with my siblings and I was like, *I am so glad that I don't, I didn't have primary years sort of feeling the need.*

There was that moment, right, when the Internet was supposed to be this kind of and it was, right, this kind of democratizing, liberating kind of space, right, where, you know, you're a queer kid in Nebraska and you're going to connect with people, right, everywhere and you're going to create community. And then capitalism kind of monetized everything and kind of made it, again, this kind of instrument of greed and this instrument of lies, not all of it, but some of it. Right?

What I do is I've tried to get off almost all social apps, social media apps. So I only have Instagram and I literally only have it for the books. Right? And I only post about things having to do with books. I almost never post about anything else. I'm not on Facebook. I'm not on Twitter. I'm not on Blue Sky. I try like, your phone will give you how many hours a week, you know, your weekly count of how many hours you were on the phone. And I strive for, like, three hours a week. That's my goal. Right now, I'm at five. Like, I'm still, like, in a seven day period. I bought an old school alarm clock, so I don't use my phone to wake me up anymore. And I don't check my email before I get into the office because I'm like, nothing if you're writing me an email, there is nothing I need to know before coffee and like books and reading and stuff like that. So I have made an intentional purpose for that. And what I do instead is I read. I read poetry almost every morning as a kind of way into the world. Because again, for me, it's about slowing things down. I want the world to slow down so that I can actually pay attention to it.

For the first time in my life, since November, I have struggled with anxiety. And the last thing that I want to do is look at that stuff. I just think, I believe Toni Morrison when she said, that's the distraction. It's keeping you from the work. And so I'm just like, okay, Toni. I'm gonna stick with you. I'm gonna remind myself of that.

Kate: Love that. I think a lot of listeners need to hear that. That's fantastic. Jason.

Jason: I tell my students that I used to love coming into the classroom because there'd be this, you know, this of conversation, and then it would quiet down and we would start class. And then that's gone because everyone's just on their phones. And I tell them that, you know, the phone kind of makes you an astronaut. Right? Like, you're on this tether back to some other place, and you're never really where you are because you're so insulated and so kind of pulled back.

And so, you know, I get them to talk to each other kind of right away, the first slide on the first day on the PowerPoint is, you know, turn to the person next to you and introduce yourself and give them an appropriate compliment. And then, you know, you have to complete the phrase, *hello. I like your...* And once they start actually talking to each other, it's kind of amazing. And then, you know, can be hard to bring them back, but that's, like, really satisfying.

There are sort of two things that I think that happened with screens. And one of them is weird because it didn't happen with television, right, that with television, which is a screen, that you can make one kind of joke on Saturday Night Live. You can make another kind of joke on an evening talk show. You can make another kind of joke during the day when the kids are watching. But there were these kind of levels of decorum and the screen is kind of flattened at all. And so like when I'm teaching creative nonfiction right now, I'm trying to get my students to go to magazine stores and see that Interview magazine is different than The Atlantic, is different from Foreign Affairs because they just see screens. It's just all there all at once. And it's made everyone very literal. And I can't teach, one art anymore because my students think it's self help. If I teach Bishop's *One Art*, I'm not joking. My students and it actually happened with grown ups, not college age students, but professionals. I was doing a workshop and, and they all thought it was self help. We're really grateful that Elizabeth Bishop was really showing them how to, you know, get through the hard times because they can do it.

But the other thing I tell them about the internet, and I, and I remind myself about this all the time, is that, you know, we shifted our values specifically to grow it. We said, it's okay to make threats. That's okay. Threaten anyone you want. We said, it's okay to slander someone. That's fine. No one will be responsible. It's okay to libel someone. Totally fine. Lie all you want. There will be no consequences. And theft is A-Okay. And so I talked to my students about, know, like, why can't you just walk into the Wayne Reed or Walgreens or CVS or whatever it is, where it publics, but in New York, like you can't walk into a CVS and get shampoo. It's all behind glass because Amazon is a fence, right? That like stolen goods go into these online supply chains.

And with AI, why does AI work? Because it's already been stolen. The reason AI works and delivers all of these wonderful papers in this loose setting language is that it's all ready been stolen. And they had absolutely no sense that anything on the internet that they're not paying for might be theft because it's just been stolen for them. And so like, even with something like, like if I'm teaching a living author, I really want them to buy the book because they need to support presses. And so, you know, I think that whenever I'm sort of interacting with my own screens, I'm sort of thinking about like my younger brother is in tech and he always says, *you know, if you're not paying for it, you're the product*. Right?

Every time I'm on Instagram, I'm the product. You know, the engagement doesn't matter. I don't use any AI. I don't want anything to do with it, in part because it's already stolen. Although there was, a lawsuit and I forget the name of the AI company, but they just lost. And so they owe a large class action payout to authors. So we'll see where we go from there.

Kate: We live in a strange world, indeed.

Break

Kate: So as we're wrapping this up, Jose, could you read us another poem?

Jose: Yeah. This poem is from the collection, with Red Hen, and it's called "I Wasn't Lionel Messi".

I turned the calendar in my downtown apartment, and it was New Year's Day. I had somehow forgotten my entire past, childhood included. I didn't even recall my name. Was it David? I looked like a David with my pious haircut. Was it David de la Cruz? No. It wasn't. Ronaldo? Leonardo? Leo? Was I Lionel Messi? No. I wasn't. I was, though, in denial, perhaps of some accentuated failures, my inability to study law, my languid approach to language, my longing for prima ballerinas and tenured professors in the humanities or poetry, Western philosophy, aka the depressive arts. No. I would never be Lionel Messi. I never scored two goals against France. Try as I did.

Kate: Thank you so much. Thank you. Soledad.

Soledad: This is the last poem in the collection. It's called "Odd Fellows 2:15".

Here is where the tumor grew. A small hill with wild ants, browns and blacks the size of grains of sand, or maybe the size of gray water worn pebbles. It grew here in this yellow and brown Second Floor room where students come trudging up the stairs in the bleak light of winter, sit and cry in my purple chair about mother's exams, insurance bills. In this room where I hand out Kleenex, it grew like kudzu along the walls, lace of green, thick veins and tendrils like the curl of a question mark. When did it start to bloom? This tissue, this mound of fat and cells with teeth. When did it burst through the walls thick like rope? A tight hard rock vibrating in sheet. I grew here too. Young scholar. Bright from the nightmares of grad school. Arrived already blue after battles with theory. In this room I started reading again for the first time it seemed gathered up books. Blood. Wanted to remember the joy of the thing. How much I longed to find more than flaws and metaphors after grad school. In this room, I tried for magic. I tried to be more than being lost. I tried for something like love. Now two decades in what am I exactly? Not as new. Not as tender. Not as. But words seem small for this metamorphosis. As I learned again to feel what time can do for the scars of learning. This tumor grew. A silent bomb. A shadow coal creature without light. These cells found life inside me made whole universes with mitosis clung to the soft parts of my body and flung themselves into living like wildfire in a parched forest. After the months of poison of mouth sores and night terrors and sweat. I am back in this room again. There is an aching silent hole inside my right breast. The room is still the color of canaries after rain. The books the words seem never to have left as if they borrowed a place

inside the shelves. A home of black ink and paper. And I sit here in this room of my life after the war with raging cells, waiting to find the world new again, waiting to see what this body and love and time can do.

Kate: Thank you so much. Thank you. Jason.

Jason: I'm gonna read this poem because a lot of people have told me that it's meaningful to them, but I often don't read it at readings because it's a little heavy, so it can be hard to come back from. "Stardust".

Okay. Fine. So we're all made of stars, but being made of stars is like being descended from Noah or Adam. It's no big deal if you truly believe it. And what good is it to me that our sweat is made of stardust, That the unsanitary hand dryers at my school are made of stardust in the stardust bathrooms that the nursing department can't use because it turns out the star dryers are just blowing the star feces on our star hands all over the place? What good is it to me that the train to work is a star train or that my job is a star job or that the star human star body contains nine to 11 star pints of star blood. When I was star seven, I was star woken, star gently in the early morning because my star mother was losing her star blood. She collected the star blood and star cartons, which had held the star milk I drank on my star cereal to make measurement of the blood for the star doctors at the star hospital where she and my star father went to complete the miscarriage of her star fetus, while I went to the house of her star friend quietly, sleepily, and I didn't even miss a star day of star school. Oh, stars. Will you listen when I tell you I remember this? Stars, it happened five times because my star mother wanted more star life. She wanted to be a mother more times than she succeeded, and she only stopped so she wouldn't die, which was a relief because I wanted her not to die. And I think it made my mother sad that I didn't want to make more lives as much as she had. And I think that's what she meant when she made me promise over and over that I wouldn't ever hurt myself even though I had never shown any inclination towards self harm or suicide. And yet she brought it up over and over as though she knew something I didn't about myself. And even though I thought I knew something about her and her blood and the empty milk cartons we kept on hand for the next time she had to keep track of the blood she was losing, maybe I was wrong. Thirty years later, when all those fears of her bleeding to death seemed trapped in some amber of memory, she died because her star lungs were too wet to carry the star oxygen to her star blood. I'm so sorry, star mother. I'm so sorry, star corpse. Be at peace for now in the star ground as I carry forward the star life so star wasted on star me, the life you star wanted to make so star badly, the star life you star wanted enough to risk death for. And here I am with no star children of my own waiting to star crawl into the star earth saying, I'm sorry. So sorry. Thank you for this life, star mother. So sorry. So sorry. I just don't want it. So sorry. So sorry. I just want it to be over. So sorry.

Kate: Thank you so much. Thank you. I want to thank all of you for your words. I want to thank all of you for being Red Hen writers. I think that our relationship with the press can be a challenging thing. Whenever I'm talking with Red Hen writers, I think that for a relationship between a writer and a publisher to work, it's a long, slow dance and we don't always get all the

steps steps right, but we try. We were talking with someone yesterday and she was asking how many books we'd published and Tobi said very cheerfully, *Oh, over a thousand*. And I thought of how many relationships that's been over the thirty years and how many writers have come and gone. And we have done our best for the three of you. So much gratitude for your patience, for your hard work. I know that carrying a book around in the world is a lot of hard work, particularly during this time. And so we thank you so much. We hope that as we move forward in grace and gratitude, we will continue to be able to change the world in good ways. So much gratitude. Thank you.

Soledad: Thank you, Kate. Red Hen has been very, very good to me, and I'm sure to the writers here. And I'm very grateful for all the work that the press does in the community and in our literary world.

Kate: Thank you so much.

Jason: Oh, it's rare as an author to have a home, and I don't think any of us take it for granted. And it's really beautiful and wonderful to have a home. Thank you for making one for us. Thank you so much.

Jose: Yeah. Thank you, Kate. It's just great. And especially here locally, thanks to everybody at Red Hen.

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