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Alberto Rios

Quietude

I have listened for what makes no sound,
Trying not to mistake it for silence.

This quiet is louder than anything
I have heard noise make.

Listen, if you can.
Nothing makes no sound.

It is long in its making where noise is fast.
It is slow in its unmistakable intensity.

I have worked all my life to hear it
As one might listen in the dark for a wolf.

Every sound is not a wolf – but one.
Every sound is not a breath stopped – but one.

I have listened, hoping not to hear
What wants not to be heard.

from *Every Sound Is Not a Wolf*. Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2025.

Alberto Rios

What's Happening

There are times when nothing happens.
It belongs to no story, is recorded in no history book.

Nothing-happening happens when we leave the room.
It happens when we close the car door,

Leaving the car in the garage overnight. In truth,
It happens all the time, everywhere, all around the world.

But somewhere along the path, *something happening*
Got all the billing.

People started to go out of their way
To find something happening.

Nothing-happening got a bum rap.
Teenagers abandoned it, big towns avoided it,

Television shows and movies never talked about it.
Children sometimes bumped into it on summer vacations

But that was all. Nothing-happening couldn't give itself away, even to retirees.
Historians could shake their heads knowingly, asserting:

The Industrial Revolution about did it in.
Of course, the invention of neon lights didn't help.

All nothing-happening can do now is to clock in,
Another day at work, quietly rolling up its shopworn sleeves,

Putting on its soft leather apron: these
The quiet assurances of a thriving, healthy business.

from *Every Sound Is Not a Wolf*. Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2025.

We Are the Mapmakers of Sudden Change

Alberto Rios

Change is the country no map tells you about.
Change is a secret destination to which you are invited

And cannot refuse, no matter the grand plans you have made.
You simply go, you must go, you will go.

On a small map, what happens next seems just a half step away,
A trifling step. But brought to scale, it is a massive leap in a life lived.

We want to go *over there*: but instead, we stumble over a rock.
We cut an onion too vigorously. Someone else drives too fast.

Then suddenness takes over. Suddenness, the like-it-or-not
Measure of change, which makes clear there is no going back.

You are going on a new adventure in this country with no name.
It may be fun.

Invention, innovation, the arts: these are one side of suddenness,
The human forging and making of the welcome new.

Tragedy, heartbreak, and loss, however, are its very real other side.
In the one, the words are *epiphany, connection, eureka, aha!*

While in the other, the words are all simply *oh no* –
All of them a vocabulary of the new moment's geography.

My mother as a young teenager lived through the Battle of Britain,
Her hometown being bombed every dark night.

She and her younger sister had the game of going outside each morning
To see how much new shrapnel had embedded in their front door.

We find our way through change, each of us. When we get lost,
The only way to find this place's map is to understand there is no map.

No directions are handed to us. We struggle with the language.
We have led the way through change, so that now the map is ours to make.

Forward is our magnetic north and is all we have – but it is a great deal.
Through the fairy-tale bramble of all suddenness and fear: *Onward*.

Alberto Rios

Five Years Later

I was, and now I am.

So much goes into the saying of those few words.

Sometimes this change is sweetness,
A kiss, a caress. Sometimes,

Nothing warns us. It cannot be thought by us.
It is done to us. A gun,

An earthquake, a flood—any of the muscular
Horrors of this world.

In those instances, we don't ask for it,
We don't get to take a deep breath,

It is simply the end of the chapter
And page 1 of the next. We are thrown

Into the deep water and we are angry,
We are angry, we are angry.

We could not swim, but now we are swimming—
We have to swim.

It is not fair. It is never fair.
We have no chance to be part of the decision

That changes us.
We were, and then we are. Regrettably,

We are not alone. If it is one of us,
It is all of us, so many of us.

We were, and now we are.
Sweetness or cruelty, suddenness, shock,

A rough touch that could be either:
We are changed.

[stanza break]

If it has been a kiss, our lives are turned powerfully
Toward lightness.

But when it is not sweetness, not a kiss,
We live the rest of our lives as someone else,

But someone who is still us.
If we had a gun, because we did have a gun,

If things had gone differently, better,
If the rehab had been more effective,

Had God stepped in, had anyone heard:
We would be living in the regular world.

We could look at the rabbits along the highway
And the blue, ragged mountains in the distance

Like anyone.
But five years after something has happened to us

We are not the *anyone*.
The jackrabbits and the Tucson Mountains—

We love them, not easily but fiercely, fiercely
In the new way we have had to find.

We love them as who we are now.
We love because that's what's left.

from www.poetryfoundation.org
also from Not go away is my name. Port Townsend,
Washington, 2020.

Alberto Ríos

Perfect for Any Occasion

1.

Pies have a reputation.
And it's immediate—no talk of potential
Regarding a pie. It's good
Or it isn't, but mostly it is—sweet, very sweet
Right then, right there, blue and red.
It can't go to junior college,
Work hard for the grades,
Work two jobs on the side.
It can't slowly build a reputation
And a growing client base.
A pie gets one chance
And knows it, wearing as makeup
Those sparkling granules of sugar,
As a collar those diamond cutouts
Bespeaking Fair Day, felicity, contentment.
I tell you everything is great, says a pie,
Great, and fun, and fine.
And you smell nice, too, someone says.
A full pound of round sound, all ahh, all good.
Pies live a life of applause.

2.

But then there are the other pies.
The leftover pies. The ones
Nobody chooses at Thanksgiving.
Mincemeat? What the hell is that? people ask,
Pointing instead at a double helping of Mr.
"I-can-do-no-wrong" pecan pie.
But the unchosen pies have a long history, too.
They have plenty of good stories, places they've been—
They were once fun, too—
But nobody wants to listen to them anymore.
Oh sure, everybody used to love lard,
But things have changed, brother—things have changed.
That's never the end of the story, of course.
Some pies make a break for it—
Live underground for a while,
Doing what they can, talking fast,
Trying to be sweet pizzas, if they're lucky.
But no good comes of it. Nobody is fooled.
A pie is a pie for one great day. Last week,
It was Jell-O. Tomorrow, it'll be cake.

Chale, Spanish, is an interjection meaning "No" intensified. Similar to "hell no" or "yeah right."
Also means "Man," as in "Yo, Man." Some sources say it's derogatory, showing disapproval or disagreement.

Alberto Rios

The Border: A Double Sonnet

The border is a line that birds cannot see.
The border is a beautiful piece of paper folded carelessly in half.
The border is where flint first met steel, starting a century of fires.
The border is a belt that is too tight, holding things up but making it hard to breathe.
The border is a rusted hinge that does not bend.
The border is the blood clot in the river's vein.
The border says *stop* to the wind, but the wind speaks another language, and keeps going.
The border is a brand, the "Double-X" of barbed wire scarred into the skin of so many.
The border has always been a welcome stopping place but is now a stop sign, always red.
The border is a jump rope still there even after the game is finished.
The border is a real crack in an imaginary dam.
The border used to be an actual place, but now, it is the act of a thousand imaginations.
The border, the word *border*, sounds like *order*, but in this place they do not rhyme.
The border is a handshake that becomes a squeezing contest.

The border smells like cars at noon and wood smoke in the evening.
The border is the place between the two pages in a book where the spine is bent too far.
The border is two men in love with the same woman.
The border is an equation in search of an equals sign.
The border is the location of the factory where lightning and thunder are made.
The border is "NoNo" The Clown, who can't make anyone laugh.
The border is a locked door that has been promoted.
The border is a moat but without a castle on either side.
The border has become Checkpoint *Chale*.
The border is a place of plans constantly broken and repaired and broken.
The border is mighty, but even the parting of the seas created a path, not a barrier.
The border is a big, neat, clean, clear black line on a map that does not exist.
The border is the line in new bifocals: below, small things get bigger; above, nothing changes.
The border is a skunk with a white line down its back.

from [www. poets.org](http://www.poets.org)

Everything's been said
But one last thing about the desert,
And it's awful: During brush fires in the Sonoran desert,
Brush fires that happen before the monsoon and in the great,
Deep, wide, and smothering heat of the hottest months,
The longest months,
The hypnotic, immeasurable lulls of August and July—
During these summer fires, jackrabbits—
Jackrabbits and everything else
That lives in the brush of the rolling hills,
But jackrabbits especially—
Jackrabbits can get caught in the flames,
No matter how fast and big and strong and sleek they are.
And when they're caught,
Cornered in and against the thick
Trunks and thin spines of the cactus,
When they can't back up any more,
When they can't move, the flame—
It touches them,
And their fur catches fire.
Of course, they run away from the flame,
Finding movement even when there is none to be found,
Jumping big and high over the wave of fire, or backing
Even harder through the impenetrable
Tangle of hardened saguaro
And prickly pear and cholla and barrel,
But whichever way they find,
What happens is what happens: They catch fire
And then bring the fire with them when they run.
They don't know they're on fire at first,
Running so fast as to make the fire
Shoot like rocket engines and smoke behind them,
But then the rabbits tire
And the fire catches up,
Stuck onto them like the needles of the cactus,
Which at first must be what they think they feel on their skins.
They've felt this before, every rabbit.
But this time the feeling keeps on.
And of course, they ignite the brush and dried weeds
All over again, making more fire, all around them.
I'm sorry for the rabbits.
And I'm sorry for us
To know this.

A Small Story About The Sky

The fire was so fierce,
So red, so gray, so yellow
That, along with the land,
It burned part of the sky
Which stayed black in that corner
For years,
As if it were night there
Even in the daytime,
A piece of the sky burnt
And which then
Could not be counted on
Even by the birds.

It was a regular fire—
Terrible—we forget this
About fire—terrible
And full of pride.
It intended to be
Big, no regular fire.
Like so many of us,
It intended to be more
And this time was.
It was not better or worse
Than any other fire
Growing up.
But this time, it was a fire
At just the right time
And in just the right place—
If you think like a fire—
A place it could do something big.

Its flames reached out
With ten thousand pincers,
As if the fire
Were made of beetles and scorpions
Clawing themselves to get up,
Pinching the air itself
And climbing,
So many sharp animals
On each other's backs
Then into the air itself,
Ten thousand snaps and pinches
At least,
So that if the sky
Was made of something,
It could not get away this time.

[stanza break]

Alberto Rios

Finally the fire
Caught the sky,
Which acted like a slow rabbit
Which had made a miscalculation.
It didn't believe this could happen
And so it ran left,
Right into the thin toothpicks of flames,
Too fast to pull back,
The sky with all its arms,
Hands, fingers, fingernails,
All of it
Disappeared.
Goodbye.

The sky stayed black
For several years after.
I wanted to tell you
This small story
About the sky.
It's a good one
And explains why the sky
Comes so slowly in the morning,
Still unsure of what's here.
But the story is not mine.
It was written by fire,
That same small fire
That wanted to come home
With something of its own
To tell,
And it did,
A small piece of blue in its mouth.

from www.poetryfoundation.org

Alberto Rios

December Morning in the Desert

The morning is clouded and the birds are hunched,
More cold than hungry, more numb than loud,

This crisp, Arizona shore, where desert meets
The coming edge of the winter world.

It is a cold news in stark announcement,
The myriad stars making bright the black,

As if the sky itself had been snowed upon.
But the stars—all those stars,

Where does the sure noise of their hard work go?
These plugs sparking the motor of an otherwise quiet sky,

Their flickering work everywhere in a white vastness:
We should hear the stars as a great roar

Gathered from the moving of their billion parts, this great
Hot rod skid of the Milky Way across the asphalt night,

The assembled, moving glints and far-floating embers
Risen from the hearth-fires of so many other worlds.

Where does the noise of it all go
If not into the ears, then hearts of the birds all around us,

Their hearts beating so fast and their equally fast
Wings and high songs,

And the bees, too, with their lumbering hum,
And the wasps and moths, the bats, and the dragonflies—

None of them sure if any of this is going to work,
This universe—we humans oblivious,

Drinking coffee, not quite awake, calm and moving
Into the slippers of our Monday mornings,

Shivering because, we think,
It's a little cold out there.

from poets.org

Alberto Rios

Salt Sky

The bright night sky,
Doorway to everything—

In all that black
All those stars:

Salt.
Pinpricks.

White fireworks.
Perlite.

We look up
Pulled into the immensity,

Lifted into the limitless—
As if it were a hole

We are falling into,
Up instead of down.

We stand on the earth,
Breathe in the night.

It is all too big.
We go back inside.

from poetryfoundation.org
from Poetry. January/February 2026

Alberto Rios

We Are of a Tribe

We plant seeds in the ground
And dreams in the sky,

Hoping that, someday, the roots of one
Will meet the upstretched limbs of the other.

It has not happened yet.
We share the sky, all of us, the whole world:

Together, we are a tribe of eyes that look upward,
Even as we stand on uncertain ground.

The earth beneath us moves, quiet and wild,
Its boundaries shifting, its muscles wavering.

The dream of sky is indifferent to all this,
Impervious to borders, fences, reservations.

The sky is our common home, the place we all live.
There we are in the world together.

The dream of sky requires no passport.
Blue will not be fenced. Blue will not be a crime.

Look up. Stay awhile. Let your breathing slow.
Know that you always have a home here.

from Poetry. June 2025.
from poetryfoundation.org