

Renee Gladman
**The Order of
Time**

01/04

I had been looking into the night sky for a long time, wondering how to place certain events of my seeing – shooting stars, stars going nova, etc. – in sequence with other events of my living, so that the time I felt at my feet was the same as that in my eyes. But people were saying what you saw when you looked up in the sky were happenings from thousands or millions of years ago, and the effects of their having happened were just now reaching us; thus when we looked up we mostly only saw the past, a past so distant it was impossible to contain and relate to your own timeline. I would think those thoughts while looking up into the sky and would find it oddly comforting when the conundrum took over parts of my brain, captivated me so entirely that I'd have to bring up the problem in conversations with friends. I made intervals to talk about planets and the delta quadrant, and where time was, where events happened, why space was so vast, how it could be so vast, what the purpose of such infinite space would be. Those would be the things I thought while I also carried on with the ordinary tasks of my living, for example, writing an introduction for a special section of afterwords I'd gathered for a forthcoming issue of the *Black Warrior Review*. I'd asked writers I was currently admiring to write afterwords for books of theirs that had already been published or were soon to be published and it was early February of 2020 that I'd asked this. Something was going wrong in China and beginning to go wrong in Seattle, but that was all I knew at the time. People said yes to writing an afterword and promised to deliver theirs in April.

For a long time, you were looking at the sky: it was full of mystery. "We are on a planet," you said to pull the blanket of confusion over you. "We are in a solar system that is inside of a larger system and somewhere, maybe seventy-five years away (only if you have warp drive) there is the delta quadrant." I was looking up at the sky, waiting for my afterwords, when I brought my eyes down. We were being told to stay inside. This was early March. I'd never been told that before. People said go get enough food for three to four weeks then close the door. We didn't live in a city at the time. We lived in a barn in a small town in a state that shared propinquity to what was going on, but our part of the state was more tucked away. We couldn't experience things firsthand. By the time people sat to write their afterwords we were in a pandemic. We had been inside for months. People were dying everywhere. "Our brains had to have changed," I wrote in my introduction to the section of afterwords. It was May; it seemed perhaps that a century had passed. I was still looking up into the sky because I needed an occupation that would provide an escape. I didn't want to worry

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Renee Gladman, *Untitled Moon Score* from the series *One Long Black Sentence* (Image Text Ithaca Press, August 2020).

about the apocalypse; I didn't want to navigate menopause. No one ever mentioned that you would have to do menopause and the apocalypse at the same time. I needed distraction from worrying about what skills I would have when the apocalypse came, what would I have to offer. I decided I wanted to be the one that would lead people through the woods as they foraged for things – things to eat and things to use for healing. I wouldn't be a tracker as much as I would stand and look around while they were bent to the ground or while they stood in a clump of shrubs. I would look at the sky; I would listen to the air. I would say, "Okay, we need to move on." I would help people spot the things they were looking for, then they would dig into the ground for them. It wouldn't be the most important job, but it was what I was up for doing. I was looking at the sky and then looking at the afterwords that began to trickle in. People couldn't help but write about the crisis as they reflected on these books that had been completed long before the crisis began; some of the books had been out in the world for over a year before we found ourselves inside this pandemic. I had to think about time in my introduction and I had to think about the lockdown mind and how it couldn't be the same mind as that which functioned previous to the crisis. I was reading lesbian romances at the time and was waiting for the lockdown romances to emerge, but they had yet to appear. I wanted to know how a lockdown mind would find love. By mid-May, I'd received all of the afterwords and spent a weekend writing the introduction. I wanted to say for whatever time it would be read that we had passed through something, that we were probably still passing through it (because there really didn't seem to be an end to the crisis; we were nearly three months into isolation). I wrote trying to anticipate what our brains would be like six months from now when the journal came out. What would six months of looking up into the sky (mostly by then the sky in my mind) and hardly venturing out *do* to my reading? What would it make of what I needed? It seemed clear we would need afterwords because that was what the days felt like: living in the wake of something.

The day after I submitted my portfolio of afterwords, introduction included, George Floyd was murdered by a police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States of America. We were in the year two thousand and twenty. Time split and the two timelines we were now living shook violently. We were living a pandemic and a global uprising at the same time. It was hard to say what you were saying because every new day brought an incalculable change to your world and to your language. You didn't know Norway would

get involved. You couldn't have imagined the Minneapolis city council would actually vote to dismantle its police department. You went to sleep and when you woke more people had gathered, more change had happened. One day all of Instagram was a flow of vivid black empty tiles, an act that took up more space than it made. White people began pulling from their shelves crusty books written by black authors and saying, "Read this" or "Follow this person." Everyone who was anyone was saying, "Black Lives Matter," but inadvertently were saying, "Some black lives matter," which was all anyone ever said anyway. Any white one. So, we spent a few days finding out which were the black lives that mattered and the rest of us went on with our names unsaid. I wanted to write about this but that was "blackout Tuesday" and by the time Thursday had come along the tiles were gone, the shoutouts had diminished. I was trying to find those days in the night sky. I knew they were gone (or not yet arrived) but maybe there'd be a trace of them somewhere. People started asking me to say what I felt, asking how things looked from where I was, and I was afraid to say anything because of the way time tremored. We couldn't speak of the present reflectively. We could post, but how did we essay?

I am writing; it is nearly the end of the second week of June and everything has changed again. I can't tell what's happening. It's hard to see from the barn. Some things have been achieved and the world seems to have gone a bit silent. I think we are shocked that Minneapolis is willing to disband its police force. We can't believe that this is actually being considered. We also can't believe that there have been more killings of brown and black bodies in the interim. We still can't believe our president. We wish the election was tomorrow. The world is going to change again. Time will be shredded. And the infection rate for the coronavirus continues to surge. I don't know how to write in such a way that when someone reads this, later, weeks or months after I've written it, I will have left enough space for the unknown to tear everything I've said apart but will have left me and you with some semblance of form and experience. That I did live what I lived and read what I read. People did erupt from their shelters, their containers (the pressure of those walls meant to keep us safe yet simultaneously driving us to depression, listlessness, deep anxiety over resource and the future of resource); people did swarm, did put on their masks and braved, said fuck it, said fuck you, changed time, made a moment we could all feel. But the whole time this was happening, you were worried about the virus and worried that after protesting people would just stay outside, forgetting they had breached their confines for a

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reason. We no more wanted to live with the virus than we did with violence against black bodies. I didn't want reminding. I never wanted to get used to it.

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Renee Gladman has published eleven works of prose and poetry, most recently a brief detective novel *Morelia*, and two books of drawings, *Prose Architectures* (Wave Books, 2017) and *One Long Black Sentence* (forthcoming 2020, Image Text Ithaca press). Recipient of numerous awards and fellowships, she makes her home in southern New England with poet-ceremonialist and herbalist Danielle Vogel.

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