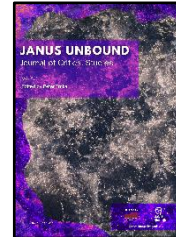


Title: I Can't See What I'm Looking At, While the Heart
Feels the Pulse of Community

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Source: *Janus Unbound: Journal of Critical Studies*, vol. IV, no. II
(Summer 2025), pp. 113-118

Published by: *Memorial University of Newfoundland*



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Janus Unbound: Journal of Critical Studies is published by Memorial University of Newfoundland

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I Can't See What I'm Looking At, While the Heart Feels the Pulse of Community



*Janus Unbound: Journal
of Critical Studies*
E-ISSN: 2564-2154
4(2) 113-118
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2025

eyes cannot see without heart
eyes need heart to see
my heart was not prepared to meet my eyes

The day after evacuating. It must have been Wednesday—it takes time in these days in this place to sort out the day, to place oneself in time. Driving along our street, steeling, bracing, shallow constricted breathing, anticipating what we would find when we arrived, I was looking out the passenger window at ashes, a fireplace standing. I was looking at a neighbor's house, a neighbor's house I have walked by countless times on regular walks, a house I drive by even more countless times. I was looking at the ashes of a house that burned completely to the ground, save the fireplace and the shell of the washer and dryer. I did not see what I was looking at. I did not see what my eyes were looking at.

"That was Gloria's house."

"Adrian said it was a County shed that burned."

"That was a house; remember the house with the fence? The white cat on the fence?"

"Adrian said it was a shed that burned," I said insisting.

"Sweetheart, that was a house. Don't you remember our walks by it? We took walks by it every day."

Now, I feel ashes with the beauty of what was lived before, what was lived in that place, perceiving just the first name of the woman who lost her home, the beauty of her name suspended above and within the ashes, a beauty naming her place, now ashes. Ashes with a fireplace and shell of a side-by-side washer and dryer. I cannot more than glance, I cannot try to see the ring of what was the children's trampoline.

Goosebump shivers.

Two weeks and an eternity later. I said softly as we were up until that fraction of a second heading the other direction, heading to our temporary home,

"Turn up Lake."

"Are you suure?"

"I'm ok."

I Can't See What I'm Looking At

I could not see our post office no more. The African cultural center store next door, whose community beauty always filled with deep breath and relief my lungs and my soul feeling two-footed on earth when I stopped at the post office, no more. There are no markers. How can he tell where they were. Without reference points. Obliterated by mighty fires. His heart has long since been prepared to see; his heart holds testimonies to horrors and the greatness of social networks.

Wisely turning left knowing that was enough for me this day, we passed our hardware store, our 1934 hardware store no more, looking at its beautiful brick archways I was seeing the glass windows where there was nothing, air, I was seeing a reflection from across the street in the windows that weren't there. Blinking I strained to see that there was no glass just the blown out space, a fractured arch facade in front. "I'm seeing glass when it's gone." Now I realized, now the second time I recognized, I'm not seeing what I'm looking at. For two weeks feeling a lifetime I've been thinking about the people we know, the daily human interactions with and within. But driving by, a passenger passing by, I cannot see until I blink and blink as if it is my glasses or the glass in the car that blurs my resisting vision.

Another sleepless night I ask myself, who am I writing this for? The stars, I think to myself. That's what I'll write in the morning. For eternity. For life. For life, for living through this together, I think, that's better.

I am certainly not writing for those devastated, can't, incomprehensible magnitude of suffering for each relationship displaced, just goosebumps whenever I speak of any part of it. They speak. Such suffering. I certainly write to convey respect and sharing in sorrow.

Why do I want to write. What do I want to express. There was so much noise before the hurricane of fire, so much incessant noise drowning out life. Drowning into and conflicting our heartbeats. Only music, love, laughter and care, dancing, restore our natural heartbeats.

Throughout not seeing the devastation I was looking at, a goosebump shiver now a daily part of life, new to me, a connectedness to lizards, sensing what it must be to live life as cold blooded only able to move in warmth, I felt feeling people. Feeling people, feeling life, perceiving heart to heart never failed. My heart was not prepared to meet my eyes. My heart was not prepared to connect to what my eyes were seeing. But the heart of the people who came together, who are together, has been felt from the start.

a kind of men
kind men

“It used to be a requirement.”

The first story I was going to write that Wednesday afternoon was “A Kind of Men.” The kind of men who hosed down our home, our house. The kind of men, the kind of friend, who packed up tools to cut down “fuel”—that’s what we call plants and leaves and branches that can burn—the kind of men, the kind of friend, who first wrote to inquire about our elder’s well-being, our neighbor, offering to come help us clear debris, who was there within the hour. First I declined the offer.

“Maybe tomorrow.”

The winds picked up and I felt politeness and hesitation to impose are not for now. This is another time, another place. Accept. He was there in an hour.

Lucky

Lucky is Lucky precisely because I could never hope to catch him. His people—his home diagonally across the street extending to ours, to the neighbors on both sides and across the street—feed him and he doesn’t get close. For twenty years. Lucky was in mourning when the hurricane of fire hit. He’d lost his companion of twenty years and would meow and meow at Claudine, still keeping his Lucky distance. Lucky has skill.

“I think we’re gonna be ok because Lucky just crossed our path on the driveway,” I said.

Calvino asked if I’d caught him.

“No, I could never catch him.”

Calvino looked at me in that instant, penetrating, a look that betrayed his questioning what he knew of me, like I might be a replicant and he’d never considered that before. Later at my insisting trying to explain that Lucky would simply not be caught, Calvino said he was just thinking in that moment about how we could catch him. I think he’s just polite, gracious. Calvino’s look betrayed a stunned questioning whether my heart was not connected. Lucky’s in my heart; I knew he’d be Lucky.

“No words” I said when Calvino left, the gratitude for his heart and soul, unwavering.

A different world again from the time he had arrived. A world of fear soothed by companionship, aid, caring, conversation and laughter.

The next day and an eternity later, now Thursday, the neighborhood now sealed off by the Sheriffs. We would try to park and ask if it was possible to enter on foot. Getting out of the car I saw, my heart saw, a beautiful man walking towards us, a kind of walking, a slow moving like a volcano of feeling.

I Can't See What I'm Looking At

“Do you live there? They'll let you in if you live there,” he assured us.

...

“I lost everything, my house, my job.” Tears streaming down his face.

We each squeezed his arm, the heart trying not to console what is inconsolable but to express sharing his sorrow, caring. I regret being overwhelmed, stumbling, not getting his name, not offering our names. We were all delirious. Blown dry by smoke and falling and fallen trees, the appreciation of homes and the town being reduced to ashes, bone crushing exhaustion of sorrow, winds, when will they stop. He lost his home and his job, tears streaming down his beautiful face, a beautiful handsome strong man. He helped us, encouraging us to try to get to our own. His heart could see our quiet desperation, anxiety, being lost at home. His name for us is Beautiful Man, beautiful man with a stick. He'd been walking slowly down the main road clenching a branch, clenching placedness on this for now randomly scorched-earth.

I learned two names but would not place them onto familiar faces and homes for some time to come, in the days that followed. For days they were in my heart young strong men, because who else could have the tremendous stamina and strength. They fought fires on our street for at least a week. Buckets and pools. Buckets and pools. A root fire. Confusion. Panic. Was our elder friend's roof across the street on fire? No, it was not a typo, a root fire. Root fire? Calm. A deep breath. When I asked Adrian if he knew these young men he said he did! but that they're not so young. These are great men. Jimmy Carter great men. We knew them before to say 'hello' as each walked his dog. We knew them before the hurricane of fire as familiar faces. Now our street owes our standing homes to their herculean efforts. A kind of men. The National Guard had the neighborhood sealed. The evacuation order was in place. If residents did not leave they had to stay inside their home or risk arrest for looting. These men stayed. They put out fires with buckets and pools. Remember Maui. The houses on the street that remain standing, all but Gloria's and some garages and shrubs, our homes, still exist because these men understand what Lucky understands, what is essential to survive. For us humans it is cooperation. For cats it is not being caught, great speed, great caution without exception regarding human beings, not being seen by humans except from a distance.

I asked Adrian to make sure Lucky had water. Claudine was fretting. I connected them. Great caretakers each of them of multiple generations.

Our sage, a good friend, a wise man, has said of our terrible times, what I call the incessant noise: “It is not that there are not good people. It is that there is not a critical mass.”

The critical mass was there cooperating when the institutions that manufacture the heartbeat conflicting noise are temporarily silenced by Mother Nature's reminder of our place. They are not Santa Ana winds. Why won't they stop saying that. Telling people that. Never experienced before hurricane winds. The sub-

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zero weather in the eastern Midwest not the upper real Midwest. Blizzard in New Orleans and across the South. Oregon fire one million acres. 14,000 acres of a hurricane of Eaton fire we fled incomprehensible. “Did they remember Maui?” Houston, a dog who carries the name of the hurricane for his Search and Rescue fire captain companion. Canada. On and on and on across Mother Earth. The Arctic is melting. “The refrigerator doors are open.”

The hearts are there. The hearts are here. Cooperating, caring, mutual aid loving. When we are we are Lucky. We have our senses. We understand what life demands. We are not cats. We do not have cat skills. Our skill is loving cooperation and mutual aid, an understanding and appreciation of a shared fate. The Beautiful Man had lost his home and his work, his shelter and his livelihood. Yet he still cared to help us find the state of our home.

An eternity later. Large man banging on Earl’s door, as we were leaving for the evening. Yelling out “Tio! Tio!” A former student trying to find his mentor, to know he’s safe after the National Guard pulled north, unsealing our street. “Tio” an honorary term of respect for his elder, his school counselor. We met a brilliant man that evening, informing him of Earl’s whereabouts during the aftermath of the hurricane of fire. We shared loving stories of the beautiful, loving, feisty Earl whose loving vitality changed so many lives, who welcomed us into the community, always chuckling, always loving. A great man. Our new-found friend, we find, connected too to our other dear neighbors, our extended kin. Earl’s former student’s name appeared in the paper a day or two later, his efforts for the community ravaged by fire, loss of employment, another great man of community. Our web of beautiful relations in these multigenerational communities blossoming.

These stories are dedicated to Tio EZ and the Zars families. You know who you are. It is dedicated to our elders. It honors the kind of men and women caring for each other through the devastation of hurricane winds and fire through our lovely town of Altadena. It is dedicated to our elders and their long-term place. I’m writing to remember. The names of the beautiful creatures in this story have been changed, with the exception of Lucky.

Michalina in Altadena
The Eaton Fire 2025

Recommended readings:

- Guha, Ramachandra. 1989. "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique," *Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 11: 71-83.
- Kropotkin, Peter. 1902. *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications Incorporated.
- Mies, Maria. 2014. "White Man's Dilemma: His Search for What He Has Destroyed," *Ecofeminism*. 2nd ed. London ; Zed Books: 132-163.