Mosquito

A Memoir

by Felix Lecocq

cover image: Maya Jain

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The University of Chicago

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migration stories

The Migration Stories Chapbook Series, 2022

Drawn from the community at and around the University of Chicago

Edited by Rachel Cohen and Rachel DeWoskin

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i. Water

1.

We begin our bodies
underwater and upside down.

We lose ourselves lightly.
We let our outsides fall

slowly through the inches
beneath us. We're slipping

out, curling in, growing away
from ourselves. We break

the horizon with our mouths,
exploding from our skin.

2.

In 2018, the British biotech company Oxitec started field trials in Brazil for a new, genetically modified strain of Aedes aegypti, the mosquito that transmits the viruses responsible for yellow fever, Zika, dengue, and other diseases. Oxitec's trademarked strain breeds with wild mosquitoes, bestowing on their offspring a fatal gene variant called tTAV (tetracycline repressible transactivator variant). tTAV incites the offspring mosquitoes to produce a nontoxic protein that binds to DNA within their cells, preventing the mosquitoes from growing beyond the larval stage, killing them before they leave the water where they were born.

As of December 2020, more than one billion Friendly™ mosquitoes have already been released worldwide. So far, in Brazil, the experiment has decreased the population of mosquitoes, but instances of yellow fever remain unchanged.

Although Oxitec asserts that the Friendly™ mosquito has no negative impact on its environment, residents and environmental advocates in Florida have expressed concern over what has been called "a Jurassic Park experiment" of ecology and health. A public forum held in September 2019 returned 31,174 comments opposing the mosquitoes' release and only 56 supporting it.

On May 1, 2020, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency granted Oxitec permission to release the Friendly™ mosquitoes into Florida.

The summer Oxitec begins its sterility project, I embark on my own personal project of sterility. This is the summer the world falls apart, messy and sour as a tangerine.

3.

THIS IS MY LAST SUMMER WITH MY BODY, I say, and I mean it this time. I say this every summer. Something about summer makes me itch to get out.

The day I graduate college, over four thousand people die from the virus. I go to the doctor and tell no one. Before I leave, a pharmacist places a brown paper bag of medicine on the counter. She moves away from me when I step forward to pick it up.

At night, I smear the sharp-smelling medicine on my shoulders and back. Every night comes in a foil tube with a white plastic cap. The caps rattle in my trashcan like baby teeth.

The summer moves fitfully, like a bad dreamer. I drift around my Chicago apartment and draw waves in the carpet with my toes. By August, I am sick of the world ending, so I drive away from the Midwest to an apartment in New York City as though being in the city where I was born will change anything. The road is surrounded by trees that muffle the sound of traffic to the surrounding countryside. The trees keep the noise locked in.

I am not very smart, so whenever I am afraid of the world ending, I like to look at some trees and think, WELL, MAYBE THINGS ARE STILL ALIVE AND WILL CONTINUE TO BE ALIVE. I arrive in Manhattan invigorated. I break up with my partner. I mop the floors. By September, the West coast is on fire and I am selfish and alone, mapping rectangles of light on the floorboards, making a constellation of windows.

The summer dies, but mosquito season lives on. The bites on my legs and hands glow pink. Eight swellings. Eight mounds of ruined skin. I count them after I apply my medication in a quiet bedtime ritual. I

like to itemize my sources of suffering in the hours before I sleep, hold them all in my mind at once. Call it a collection. Call it self-indulgence. Eight mosquito bites and one broken heart. Satisfaction oozes down my back.

4.

Oxitec's Friendly™ Aedes aegypti mosquito is an oxymoron. Aedes is derived from the Greek word ἀηδής, meaning "unpleasant, distasteful, disagreeable." The philosopher and botanist Theophrastus used the word ἀηδής to define one of his thirty moral characters, the one whose title has been translated into English as "the disagreeable man."

"The disagreeable man will go to a friend and wake him out of a sound sleep to have a talk with him… At table he tells the company how we once took hellebore and was physicked through and through, and how his bile was blacker than the soup on the table… He says he has a cool cistern water at his house and a garden full of tender vegetables; that his cook is a perfect chef, and that his house is a regular hotel, for it is always full of company, and his guests are like leaky sieves,—do the best he can, it is impossible to fill them."

The Oxitec website describes the Friendly™ mosquito as "safe" and "non-biting." Even the mechanism by which they die is written with congeniality: tTAV is referred to as a "self-limiting gene." Death as the limit of the self. Death as a courtesy. Death as an act of restraint.

Maybe there's no oxymoron here. Maybe it's possible to be both friendly and disagreeable. Regardless, neither of these names is one the mosquito chose for itself.

5.

While there are mosquitoes native to North America, the Aedes aegypti is not. This particular species originated in Africa and was likely introduced to the United States by European ships.

In his book *The Mosquito: A Human History of Our Deadliest Predator*, Timothy C. Winegard writes that the mosquito "easily survived the journey on slave ships, reproducing in the plentiful barrels and pools of water. European slave traders and their human cargo provided ample opportunity for a continuous cycle of viral infection during the voyage until fresh blood could be claimed upon arrival at a foreign port."

Aedes aegypti only live for 14 to 30 days. A typical slave ship voyage was 1 to 2 years.

Of butterflies, Ocean Vuong writes: "The monarchs that fly south will not make it back north. Each departure, then, is final. Only their children return; only the future revisits the past." To a monarch butterfly, history is both temporal and spatial. It is everything behind them when they fly.

A mosquito on a ship has nowhere to go but around. I pore over the mathematics, the geometries of suffering. I look at the numbers like they'll drive me sane. I look at the mosquitoes, my eight bites made possible by historical atrocity.

Although slave ships varied in size, the ship in the Brookes diagram was 100 feet long, holding 609 enslaved people, adults and children, shackled and lying down in spaces only 10 inches high. A human head is, on average, 8 to 9 inches long. In the 1 to 2 inches of air between person and boat, the mosquitoes lived, bred, and died, hovering above saltwater 12,000 feet deep.

6.

To whom it may concern,

I was wondering if you could provide any more information regarding the just-add-water mosquito boxes that are going to be placed in Monroe County, Florida, next year. I'm specifically interested in the dimensions of the boxes, the volume of water added, and how it's all organized. Are there holes in the box? What size are the holes? Do mosquitoes breathe? I'd love to see a diagram if possible.

I'd also like to know, if a resident requests a box in their area, whether it is the resident's responsibility to add water or whether an Oxitec employee will come by and water the box while the resident watches from the yard.

Presumably it's dark in the box. Will that be confusing for the mosquitoes when they leave? Will the mosquitoes know how to leave? Will the light disturb the mosquitoes when they leave? When the mosquitoes are ready to leave, how will they know?

7.

In 1642, English slave vessels arrived in Barbados, which (unlike other Caribbean islands) lacked readily available running water. The settlers had built watering holes to catch the rain, which became breeding grounds for the newly disembarked Aedes aegypti. In 1647, the first outbreak of yellow fever occurred on the island.

Many African enslaved people had immunity to yellow fever, having already survived it in their homelands. When white servants died by the thousands, plantation owners replaced them with more enslaved workers. Slavery took hold of the island's economy, and the Aedes aegypti found themselves a home.

The mosquito thrived in Barbados, and eventually, its population spread across both South and North America, bringing disease with it. Due to advancements in pesticides and a developed cultural aversion to stagnant water, the last major yellow fever outbreak in the United States was in 1905. But the mosquito remains.

8.

Hello! It is good to hear from you. Things are as they are. I am in New York, living in my aunt's apartment and looking out the window.

You've caught me at an interesting time, in relation to the chapbook. Last night, I had a breakthrough/breakdown about the research and the writing, and today I am attempting to pick myself back up.

The problem I am facing is that every avenue of my research leads to cruelty and horror, no matter what I'm thinking about. How can I write about mosquitoes in the Florida Keys without writing about how they got there? How can I write about how they got there without writing about slave ships? How can I write about slave ships and focus my attention on the mosquitoes and not on the people?

Earlier in the summer, I was thinking about queer ecology (specifically, Anne Pollock's "Queering Endocrine Disruption") and the problem of sterility and reproductive success. I've long been a fan of Lee Edelman's "fuck the future" sense of queer resistance to reproduction. How on earth can I write about what I glibly named "my personal project of sterility" when women are experiencing forced hysterectomies in American concentration camps? How can I claim "fuck the future" when the future is so thoroughly fucked?

What was previously a campy manifesto about mosquitoes and bodies feels tasteless and unbearable with every new fact I learn about this world. I am trying to write through it, but the stakes for getting this wrong seem to be growing higher every day.

In terms of a timeline for this beast, I am really hoping to have a draft done by mid-December. I have an ever-growing reading list on the history and science of mosquitoes, but if you have any advice on how to write during/after atrocity, I would be very grateful for it.
Adorno said, "Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch." So here I am, trying to write barbarically.

ii. Waste

9.

Since I was a small child, I have always concerned myself with waste. When I was ten, I told a friend during gym class that I was working on a novel about dragons, which was true, and that I was hoping to be the youngest person ever to publish a book. My friend, also ten, replied that the youngest person who'd ever published a book had been four, and I was six years too late.

Six years!

There I stood, wavering in my white tennis shoes, blinking in the sun. I couldn't believe what a fool I'd been! How could I have wasted these years? I'd been given one chance to be young and published and extraordinary, and I had squandered it. Who cared about a ten-year-old publishing a book? At ten, your body has already been spoiled by age and bubble gum and imminent puberty. I was so distraught that I tried to push myself through the chain-link fence connecting the track field to the tennis court.

Six years of hopscotch and foursquare and pulling grass and throwing it at others, when analog clocks were still distant and hard to read, and time existed but didn't press itself into the skin like the wire of a chain-link fence.

On a calm day, thrown grass falls slowly. It settles in your hair and around your collar and remains with you even after you've been called inside.

10.

I suppose the best way to explain it is that one day I decided to ruin my body. Age wasn't ruining it quickly enough. I was getting fidgety and bored by the passage of time. At twenty-two I chose to make puberty my problem again.

While the world's infrastructure is falling apart, I place my health in the hands of capitalism. I actively invest the continuation of my self in the pharmaceutical industry, the phytosterols market, whatever fluctuations the economy makes during the next democracy death spiral. While everyone else digs for edible worms in the remains of the American empire, I'll be negotiating my insurance co-pay in the parking lot of an abandoned Walmart.

In *Testo Junkie*, Paul B. Preciado writes, "I administer to myself a series of economic transactions, a collection of pharmaceutical decisions, clinical tests, focus groups, and business management techniques." I admire the corporate buzzwords, listed as ingredients. I hold my box of testosterone to the light like a glass of wine. TESTOSTERONE USP 50MG, CARBOMER COPOLYMER TYPE B, CARBOMER HOMOPOLYMER TYPE C, DIISOPROPYL ADIPATE, ETHYL ALCOHOL, and so on.

What is transition if not a rebranding? What is passing if not a false advertisement? The gel is clear when squeezed from the tube. I coat my body and become flammable.

11.

My box of medicine comes with a little orange sticker saying "DANGEROUS UNLESS USED AS DIRECTED." The pharmacist instructs me not to get too close to women and children while using the medication as it can cause "harmful effects" on those who touch my skin. I promise not to inflict my transition on anyone else.

In the United States, testosterone is a controlled substance. The Drug Enforcement Administration classifies it as a Schedule III non-narcotic, meaning "abuse may lead to moderate or low physical dependence or high psychological dependence."

To me, psychological dependence is a sign the medicine is working.

If I take 500mg of Tylenol for a migraine and my skull stops trying to eat me alive, I often feel something close to euphoria in the absence of pain. If I take 50mg of testosterone for my diagnosed "endocrine disorder" and stare into reflective surfaces like a caged bird, has my mind been altered? Am I addicted to my own biological function?

So much of transition and coming out is saying and repeating, DON'T WORRY. THIS WON'T CHANGE ANYTHING ABOUT ME OR US OR OUR RELATIONSHIP. I'M STILL THE SAME PERSON. I WILL STILL BE THE SAME PERSON.

But isn't that the point? To be a different person?

12.

In Anne Pollock's essay "Queering Endocrine Disruption," she writes about a pair of male ibises whose homosexual relationship has been attributed to mercury pollution in their habitat. The essay's text is published alongside a photograph of two male ibises having a jaunty walk on the beach. Pollock writes, "I want to read these birds strolling on the beach without any chicks as intoxicated… Being intoxicated is an ambivalent state: impaired, yes, but also released from responsibility in particular ways that can be both dangerous and pleasurable" (185).

It's a contentious argument. Are the ibises victims of environmental destruction or two simple dandies, drunk on mercury and childlessness? Both interpretations fall into the trap of anthropomorphization or at least assuming the birds feel anything at all. Either the birds are experiencing queer suffering or they are experiencing queer joy. Even if the birds could speak, it is unlikely they'd be able to articulate the difference. Do you think you're more miserable now than you would have been, had the mercury not poisoned you? And does your homosexual lovebird feel the same way?

At my medical check-up, the doctor asks me if I'm enjoying the hormone therapy.

WELL, I say. THERE'S A PANDEMIC, SO I'M NOT REALLY ENJOYING ANYTHING.

"Give it time," he says, as if I have anything else to give.

13.

Oxitec Friendly™ mosquitoes are born in water laced with tetracycline, a yellow, metallic-tasting antibiotic that represses the gene that kills them. An antidote to their biology, so that they can survive long enough to breed and deliver fate to the next generation.

Like most insects, mosquitoes don't stay with their eggs after laying—they don't ever wait to find out if their offspring survive. The larvae die quiet, orphaned deaths from the inside out. The parents continue to live.

"From whose perspective is reproductive success the ultimate definition of 'success'?" Anne Pollock asks. "God's, Darwin's, ecologists', or the animals'?"

Before my doctor prescribes me testosterone, he asks me to sign a consent form. One of the lines on this four-page document reads: "I know that the effects of testosterone on fertility are unknown. I have been told I may or may not be able to get pregnant even if I stop taking testosterone." He is very eager to ensure I understand that I might be sacrificing fertility, that fertility is a thing worthy of sacrifice. I sign the form while he talks.

Years ago, a family member speculated gruesomely about the possibility of pregnancy in a body that might not accommodate it. Wouldn't I feel terrible if I had a child whose body was ruined because my body was ruined? Wouldn't it eat me up inside?

Never have I hated a child more. This hypothetical creature, this thing, this no-thing, this wailing puppet of skin, more beloved than me. Every night I poison myself and all the parasites that live within me. I fall asleep in my own pollution.

I make my body untenable for any human life except my own. There is vindication in the loneliness, if only you are angry enough to find it.

14.

I am irritable almost all the time. I like to pretend this is a symptom of my evolving masculinity rather than a consistent personality trait. I play video games in bed and refuse to drink water. I read a whole book on mosquitoes and tell no one.

The mosquito attacks by needles. It inserts two to cut you open, two more to maintain the wound. It inserts a fifth to drink.

Every time I get my blood drawn, I have the same fear: that the needle will be removed and I will keep spilling over the armrest and the nurse's feet and the floor. The nurse will hand me a box of apple juice with a straw and I will have to drink, quickly, endlessly, to replace myself as I flood the linoleum.

I am not fond of needles, which is why my medicine is a gel. It seeps through the skin.

15.

Not queer as in horror movie monster, queer as in apocalypse. Queer as in the end of the world. Queer as in the war on family. The death of your lover. Oil on skin. Queer as in an urn you can breathe through. A casino. A strip mall. A parking lot with nobody in it. A French cathedral that has so many windows it takes a hundred years to clean them all. Queer as in a beetle, on its back and crystalized. Legs like a funeral pyre. The smell of disinfected mornings. Queer as in Facebook sometimes recommends me my dead friends' accounts. A server humming with old photographs. The blue glow of things charging while you sleep. A billboard by the river advertising storage space. Queer as in irreversible decisions. Preemptive regret. Regret as ritual. Ritual as rebellion. Queer as in the light at the bottom of a swimming pool. Queer as in sick of the future. Queer as in here, now, for everyone who is alive or dead or real.

iii. Witness

16.

Mosquitoes grow in stagnant water. They can make a home in anything from a lake to a puddle to a soda can left out in the rain to a cardboard box in the Florida Keys. I find it funny—the distance between stability and growth. In order for you to change, everything around you must stay the same.

I don't move, but my organs do. Jostling and squirming around in there, I assume. I feel like the jaded schoolteacher for a group of lovable but rowdy boys. Sometimes they tussle and screech and mill about, and I sit exasperated, by the window. I wait to be beautiful.

Despite my incessant scratching, the mosquito bites vanish quietly into my skin. I stop counting them and start counting the acne on my back, the most concrete and triumphant evidence of my changing body.

17.

Before my transition, I was a connoisseur of crying. I cried in as many buildings, public spaces, and situations as I could. This was what passed for a personality in the pre-pandemic days.

I cried in public for the same reasons I exercised in public—to shame others for not living as authentically and glamorously as me. To put yourself purposefully in ugly situations is the most beautiful thing you can do. It's why gorgeous people always leave the flash on while taking pictures at parties.

The key to public crying is to keep your face as relaxed as possible, as if you don't even notice the tears at all. Crying is like quicksand—fighting it just makes it worse. You must quietly accept your weeping, and others will look at you and think about how stoic and brave you are for breaking down in the greeting card aisle of a CVS.

To my frustration, I have not been able to cry since starting testosterone. I have been trying to find different ways to cry like a kid tries different ways to knock out his baby teeth. I get drunk in the bath. I watch *Brokeback Mountain*. I read the news. Nothing works.

I don't know if it's the masculinity or the loneliness. I don't know if there's a difference. Without an audience, the tears collect in the pit of my stomach, making stagnant water.

18.

I reach a stage in my self-isolation where I don't watch television unless it's animated and I don't listen to music unless it's been autotuned beyond comprehension. My skin is poisonous like a frog's. My manhood is contagious. I lock myself in my apartment and vow never to be touched again.

I pollute my body and say I DON'T MOURN YOU. The mesh screens of my windows pixelate the street. The mosquitoes get in anyway.

19.

Sometimes if you sit still enough, you can see the walls breathing.

20.

The largest mosquito in the world is eighteen feet tall
and welded together. It doesn't fly but spins around
on a steel pike when the wind catches its plexiglass

wings. Silent circles. This all happens in a town
where cows bleed in the night. The air drowns
in tiny bodies. The low static of many things alive

at once. The mosquito capital of the world, or
one of them, at least. Michelangelo's *David*,
if he was over two hundred stories tall and

spinning, slowly,
like a ballet dancer.

21.

When I was a teenager, my friend and I looked at a painting for three hours. I remember it as summer, the windows of the National Gallery above us straining with sunlight. Around us, visitors and guards moved circuitously like aquarium fish. My friend and I just sat side by side on a bench and waited for time to pass.

Much of my adolescence was characterized by a sense of restlessness. I dealt with this as many teens do: by challenging myself for no reason at all except to test the limits of my own body. Sometimes I wonder if I'll ever grow out of this impulse, the restlessness.

The painting was 247 by 163.8 centimeters wide: 'The Virgin and Child with Saints' by Lorenzo Costa and Gianfrancesco Maineri, which used to hang in the first room you entered from the central hall. According to the National Gallery website, it's no longer on display.

After three hours of staring at a painting, your eyes feel dry. The canvas ripples. The figures in the painting twitch. John the Baptist develops a crick in his neck. Everyone is embarrassed to be seen by you. It is a relief to glance at the museum floor. The straight wooden lines feel like washing your vision clean.

Staring at that painting remains one of my fondest memories. It was an exercise in patience. In posture. In looking forward. I loved it for the same reason I love sitting in the passenger seat. It's the proximity to another person without them having to look at you.

22.

Because being transgender was never really about gender, it was, like everything else I do, about being loved. That's all there is. It's all I ever do, it's what I do, it's the extent of what I do, everything that I am, all that I have, it's all a torturous and euphoric effort to be loved.

23.

"Oxitec has a long-standing partnership with the Florida Keys Mosquito Control District (FKMCD) and is planning a collaborative pilot project using our Oxitec Aedes aegypti mosquitoes. Aedes aegypti mosquitoes transmit dengue, Zika, and other diseases. Oxitec's safe, non-biting male mosquito will be released in a small area to demonstrate their effectiveness controlling the wild Aedes aegypti." — The Oxitec website

Oh architects of insect loneliness, oh absent fathers of broken genomes.

The mosquitoes waltz in circles, like drunks. From a distance, they look like birds.

24.

“Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.” — John Berger

Trapped in every woman is a man. Every woman has a man trapped inside of her body, or perhaps, every woman is trapped in her own body with a man. A man and a woman sit in the body of a woman and play checkers, each watching the other with suspicion.

If the man is in here anyway, why can’t I be him? And if a woman’s body crosses the threshold and becomes a man’s body, will the original man still be there to watch it? Is the woman there too? Is she trapped? If a man and a woman are trapped in a man’s body, who are they watching?

If a man must be in my body anyway, can I not welcome him? Can I not make a home for him? Can I not say to him, Welcome, sir. Please, take your coat off at the door. Would you like a ginger ale? I hope you enjoy your stay. We have such a wonderful view.

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Afterword

We are glad and grateful to publish *All the Rivers in Paradise* and *Mosquito*: *a Memoir*, two new additions to our chapbook series, part of the ongoing Migration Stories Project at the University of Chicago. The chapbook series is our way of making a place for longer reflections about histories and experiences of migration. In these pages, poet Kirun Kapur wonders who patrols the borders: "keeping the rivers from making a sea,//keeping the dead with the dead and the living//obedient to their beds and passport lines?" She "lodges her complaint with the language," and asks: "How much are you prepared to see?" Poet and essayist Felix Lecocq launches an extraordinary investigation of mosquitoes, spinning a mosquito on a ship, with "nowhere to go but around," creating sense, "I pore over the mathematics, the geometries of suffering. I look at the numbers like they'll drive me sane," and navigating the concentric movements of working to be loved: "It's all I ever do, it's what I do, it's the extent of what I do, everything that I am, all that I have, it's a torturous and euphoric effort to be loved."

Together, these works illuminate ways human beings traverse places, eras, and selves. Each book gives us bodies; in Kapur's poetry, a head is "a plastic cup filled with water, jammed with bouquets." And in Lecocq's lyric essays, organs "tussle and screech and mill about," as the person who contains them sits, exasperated, waiting to be beautiful. Both explore transformations from the most granular to the most profound, with water at the center, a liberator and a threat, allowing for change and movement, while also creating danger. Water is a marker of both damage and hope, and our bodies, like the places we make, are temporary spaces.

The Migration Stories Project began in November of 2016 as a project of the Program on Creative Writing in the hopes of providing opportunities to tell and listen to migration stories, and to help elucidate the collective history of migration in the community at, around, and beyond the University of Chicago. Over the last five years, the Migration Stories Project has created or co-hosted public readings, and has collaborated with the Smart Museum, Student Support Services, and the Regenstein Library. In 2017, we published our debut anthology, a collection of migration stories written by people from all around our community, now accessible at https://knowledge.uchicago.edu/record/1236. And in 2019, we published our first five chapbooks, also available through the knowledge@UChicago repository.

We are pleased to be a part of the Migration Studies Cluster hosted jointly by the English Department and Program on Creative Writing, which creates research opportunities for our students and fosters new collaborative relationships among our faculty. More information on Migration Stories Projects can be found at https://creativewriting.uchicago.edu/.

We hope these two new chapbooks inspire readers as they have inspired us, to keep reading, writing, and imagining stories of movement across time and place, toward hope.

Rachel DeWoskin & Rachel Cohen
The Program on Creative Writing
University of Chicago

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Migration Stories Chapbook Series

Susan Augustine, *Jumping In*

Felipe Bomeny, *Leaving Xelajú*

Tanya Desai, *Dürer and the Rhinoceros*

Liana Fu, *Origins*

Tina Post, *Paper Trails*

Kirun Kapur, *All the Rivers in Paradise*

Felix Lecocq, *Mosquito: A Memoir*