

LOSING RIVERS KIM NGUYEN

This essay was commissioned as a response to Scott Billings exhibition pseudo-here.

For a period of time, perhaps still, actually likely still, or let's be honest maybe for my entire lifetime, I would be what you would consider a pathological liar. As a child I was fearful of being reprimanded and became secretive as a result. There were special codes, locks, and hidden possessions, things tucked inside and behind other things to keep one life from another. I became adept at minimizing my cultural difference with friends, I was expert at concealing my social difference with family. Suffocation will do this to you when you are not given permission to be your own person. You create many versions of yourself, duplicating and mutating each iteration to get closer to the you that is desired but never achieved. The lies emulsify until they become you and you them, burrowing into whatever semblance of truth stitches this body together.

I was a liar before I was a writer and I am a writer because I am a liar. What is narrative really, other than the elaborate development of half-truths? Fictions gleaned from our lives, abstracted to obscure our insecurities, to protect our relations while revealing ourselves under the softness of prose. How many threads can be removed, how many details must be gathered, for this to be convincing? How little do you get to have of us, how much must we hold back, to tend to everyone we love? How many layers below this veneer is the version of you that you have long forgotten? Who can remember anymore, who we were or who we were supposed to be. Who can remember anymore, when we started this and when we thought we would be out of it. What is narrative really, other than all the savage lies of this universe enveloped around us, a slow and lustrous brutalization until we become it and it becomes us?

We are all liars so we can sleep at night. How else can our bodies carry so much simultaneous rage and ambivalence? It is inconvenient and crushing to dwell on the truth from sunrise to sundown, when truths that are leaden to us are fluid to others. We are lying ourselves into submission, that tomorrow is better, that this is the depression & anger & fear & & that comes with revolution and before complete collapse. Exhausted, we tell ourselves that our efforts are not wasted, that all the lives before us were not squandered, that morning signals another day not another horror. As those lies settle into our bones we also deceive our loved ones via text and video calls that we will find our way back to each other again, when we know there are no returns.

We lie to everyone to do our jobs, which humiliate us with regularity, because we want to believe our existence is more than unnecessary social expenditure or extensions of institutional violence. For the record, *your deadlines are a lie your timelines are a lie your committees are a lie your qualifications are a lie your titles are a lie your archive is a lie your aesthetic contracts are a lie your institution is a lie* and yet we still show up every day.

We lie to our bodies that living in a fascist nation state is not wearing our skin down to the bones.

We lie to our friends through omission, ignoring their questionable politics and minimizing our own resentment because we are lonely.

We lie to our lovers about our happiness because it is a miracle they tolerate us at all.



We lie to the sky that this is the year we untether ourselves from the sun.

We lie to ourselves about our own weaknesses, suppressing what may just be the best parts of us, the sad vulnerable unimportant quiet and slow slivers.

We watch legal dramas to observe and study subjects who do not believe the truth is relevant. A man kills his wife and the wife before that and their deaths are not the priority but instead their perceived greed or their “inappropriate” sexual proclivities. A couple contests the malicious legal loopholes of healthcare and sues a predatory pharmaceutical company but none of it matters because their acrimonious marriage positions them as toxic and unreliable.

There is what happened and how we contextualize how it happened. There is what happened and how we aestheticize what happened. There is what happened according to you and what happened according to everyone else. There is what happened to the unicorn and why we have its tusk. What happened becomes theoretical, hypothetical, pliable. Stretched within an inch of its life.

Studies have determined that an astonishing percentage of our memories are false. We misremember and re-remember, the memories doubling over themselves with each pleat accruing new observations and pieces of information. *Recollection is reconstruction*. Events are misrepresented and distorted and erroneous facts are committed to our already perforated memories. What a relief that things flow so freely in and out of us. All that I have learned that I wish I could forget, I already am simply through remembrance. All the absolutes that my body refuses to accept as finite, as fact, as *authority*. A hull is created inside of me and I will spend the rest of this life filling it with fabrications I desire to be true.

What if our lies are how we resist possession, how we stay evasive, how we operate out of a perpetual and productive state of mistrust? How far can we bend what seems heavy and burdensome, how many ways can we deny all the forces that are ironclad and impenetrable, how do we undo what we have for as long as, forever, understood as the way it is? How do we propose & commit & construct a lie for another us that is beyond us?

A fraudulence that takes care of *you* as much as it destroys me.

Kim Nguyen is a writer and curator based in San Francisco, where she is the Curator and Head of Programs at the CCA Wattis Institute. Recent and upcoming exhibitions include Maia Cruz Palileo: Long Kwento, Jeffrey Gibson: Nothing Is Eternal, Cinthia Marcelle: A morta, Akosua Adoma Owusu: Welcome to the Jungle, and Abbas Akhavan: cast for a folly. She is currently completing her first collection of writings.

1 A language and a life shaped by your knowledge, your care, and your love, Alex Da Corte, Amy Fung, Aaron Flint Jamison, Eunsong Kim, Kegan McFadden, Divya Mehra, R & R.



Narwhal tusk, formerly from Richmond Art Gallery Collection. Photo: Josh Hite.