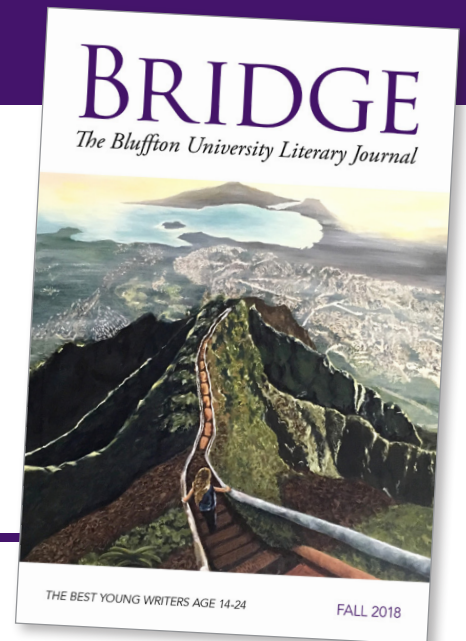


# BRIDGE

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## CIVIL UNREST

**Bessie F. Zaldívar**

I wake minutes before my phone's alarm goes off; I always do, even with unusually early times like this. I reach for my phone charging on the nightstand: 1:52 A.M. In eight minutes, I should be under the stream of hot water, fantasizing about Tegucigalpa. I should be feeling my taste buds excite with the anticipation of plantain chips and hot sauce burning my mouth. Real hot sauce, not the stuff that passes for it in Belleville, Illinois. I should be dreaming about the cacophony produced by the voices of the vendors in the streets yelling "¡Mangos, mangos! ¡Lléve mangos! ¡Cacahuates a diez!" The incessant honking of cars, people cursing at one another from behind the wheel. I long for the feeling of warm, hand-made tortillas, the heat of an unforgiving sun on my face, the smell of fried food being sold at every corner. I even dream of the smell of shit coming from the street sewers (which have had their lids stolen) and the pools of piss around almost every light post. Anticipation should be filling my heart. I should be dreaming about Tegucigalpa, the city of my soul.

But my lock screen is plastered with notifications: a WhatsApp message from my grandfather asking if I'm at the airport already, a Snapchat from my sister from hours ago, a Mango Health reminder

about my pills. I'm ready to put my phone down without opening any of them, when I see a notification that can't wait until later: "American Airlines Travel Alert in Effect."

For the second it takes for the full message to load, I'm sure it has happened: *All flights to and from Honduras have been canceled until further notice.* I feel my heart race and squeeze my phone as hard as I can, as if willing it to load faster. I will never go home. I will never see my family again. What follows will surely be the loss of electricity and thus communication; eventually, it will just be the vast consuming silence of uncertainty and panic, and me.

"Due to reports of civil unrest occurring in Honduras, American Airlines is offering additional flexibility that may allow you to change upcoming travel plans without a fee." I breathe. It's just the airlines covering their backs.

Civil unrest, so vague.

I wonder about all the other passengers receiving the same alert, double-thinking their flight today. I wonder about their reasons to ignore it, like I will. I wonder what the Spanish translation of this alert looks like. The literal translation of "civil



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unrest” is “disturbios civiles.” Disturbios, disturbance. It sounds so trivial and almost vexing. Like accidentally finding old gum below a desk or having to pee after getting in bed. “Unrest” is even worse. It makes me think of a child not being able to sit still or a baby crying after being offered the bottle. But I suppose this unrest is only a disturbance to some. I recall all the Facebook posts of people annoyed because the protests disrupted traffic. I can hear my grandmother saying the tires of her car are getting ruined from all the ashes in the streets and my friend complaining about not being able to go to the gym because of the national curfew. Disturbance, unrest. These words do not do justice to the Honduras that Facebook and Twitter have been showing me for the past few weeks.

I have not felt “disturbed” seeing the pictures of the streets I used to travel daily barricaded with gigantic rocks and burning tires, hundreds of civilians in Guy Fawkes masks and Honduran flags around their necks standing defiant, facing a sea of soldiers ready to fire. I have not felt “unrest” looking at videos of police officers storming neighborhoods in the middle of the night, firing shots into the air as people scream in terror from their windows. Nor do I feel “unrest” at the photos of gang members breaking into local stores in broad daylight to steal everything they can carry: refrigerators, motorcycles, clothes, shoes, TVs, everything.

I have not thought “How disturbing!” when reading civilian testimonies about soldiers charging into homes, beating people up or firing shots into civilian cars for disobeying the government’s 12-hour long nightly curfew. Disturbance is not a climbing death toll of innocents. Unrest is not ashes and blood sticking to the tires of passing cars.

I have felt terror, horror, and grief. But perhaps I’m just too close to it to brush it

off as disturbing and unresting.

By the time I’ve re-read the full travel alert and convinced myself to get on my flight, it’s already 2:10. My shower time has been significantly shortened. I dress in a hurry and have an odd thought upon glancing at myself in the mirror before leaving: “Should I be wearing white pants? Will the ashes that cover the streets of Honduras ruin them? Will the blood?”

#

Flying from St. Louis Lambert International, it’s all English, blond families in Cardinals and Blues shirts. Around me, the gate is full of families and couples taking selfies, or returning from the Starbucks nearby, snapping pictures of Starbucks Holiday Edition cups in their hands. These families are escaping St. Louis’s freezing weather for the heat of Miami. They’re already thinking about the beach and the paradise-like vacation days awaiting them.

But I’m nervous throughout boarding— constantly checking for news on any major event that may trigger cancellation of my flight. I read that the resistance is taking all major streets from 6 A.M. to 6 P.M.. The military is ready to disperse them-- as the last few days have proven, through any means necessary.

When I deplane in Miami International, it feels like a different nation. My ears perk as I recognize the various Spanish dialects being spoken. The smell of properly cooked beans, empanadas de carne deep fried and strong Cuban coffee strikes my nostrils. I take my time walking to my gate. There is a palpable warmth only Latinas y Latinos can radiate, and I take it all in. *Esta es mi gente.*

When I get to my gate, the sight fills my heart. It’s full; there is barely any space to sit. Usually, this would annoy me, but this time, it means that despite the flames and the chaos and the alert, we Hondurans are still going home. All

of us.

There is a Starbucks next to our gate, but everyone drinking coffee carries a cup from the Cuban cafe - even though the cafe is a long walk from the waiting area. When you’re from one of the best coffee-producing countries in the world, like Honduras (number 5, to be exact), Starbucks is a last resort. I, too, carried my cup of Cuban coffee from the far end of the terminal, unwilling to settle for less.

I sit across from a woman and man who look like they’re in in their late thirties. They both have that face, a Honduran face- although this is not to say they have the same skin color or facial features. In fact, physically, they look nothing alike. She has light skin and a long face, with thin and pointy features. Her nails and makeup are immaculate, and only the residual, fading yellow spots around her forehead and temples from recently applied hair dye betray her aesthetic. She wears jeans, a light blue and white striped blouse; a dozen metallic bracelets jingle on each hand when she rearranges her hair.

He, on the other hand, has much darker skin and several sunspots spread across his face and arms. His short, dark hair is heavily gelled and the smell of his lotion almost overpowers that of coffee and fried food being eaten around us. He sits with his legs spread and his elbows on his knees. I need not peek at their passport nor hear them talk to know they’re as Honduran as baleadas and myself. It’s kind of like what Guillermo Anderson, a Honduran singer, sang: “*Se ve la historia en los rostros de la gente,*” they carry history in their faces.

I have not been sitting long when the silence is broken. The evident and inescapable topic in all our minds and hearts is first brought up by the woman.

“Hay, espero que logremos salir del

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aeropuerto de allá sin problema,” she says, hoping we’ll be able to leave the airport without any trouble once we get home. The man and I nod. I let out a sigh of camaraderie, and the man somehow runs his hands through his cement hair and replies, “Yo solo voy porque mi esposa esta allá, todos mis hijos aca viven.”

He is only going back because of his wife; all his children live in the U.S. The two of them fall into conversation and quickly go through the basic checklist: How long have you been living in the U.S? Where in Honduras are you from? They agree that both candidates are insane and corrupt. They compare notes on who has been affected by the riots, recounting horror stories about people being kidnapped or killed or gone missing. From what little the news do report, we know some turn up in a plastic bag or in the river. I comment occasionally, but mostly limit myself to mouth noises and nods.

he woman says, “It’s like the coup all over again. People send me pictures and videos of what is happening and it feels like a déjà vu. I wish I could put them side by side with the ones they sent me in 2009; it’s exactly the same.”

I was 12 at the time of the coup. My memory of the event is like a slideshow. I see an image of a burning Popeye’s and a McDonald’s or a Burger King. I see my High School logo on one email after another announcing that classes are suspended for yet another week. I see walls sprayed with the word “GOLPISTAS” and “VIVA MEL” in red. Other than that, I can only remember adults telling jokes referencing the president taken out of the country in his pajamas. I was a child, a child happy to get spontaneous vacations during the school year; happy to have my parents unexpectedly home all the time. Of course, now I know it was much scarier than that— power was out in the city, we were isolated from

the world, military helicopters circled at night, hundreds of citizens were killed or disappeared.

I worry: If the woman is right and we are back in ’09, why are we getting on this plane?

“I haven’t been home since before the coup,” she adds, “It’s a whole other country now.”

“I haven’t been since October, before the elections,” the man responds.

“It’s a whole other country for all of us then,” I conclude.

Civil Unrest, so powerful.

#

Our boarding time gets delayed three times before I lose count. I wonder if the flight will get canceled, if the Tegucigalpa airport has been taken. Maybe the protesters broke into the landing strip and can’t be dispersed. Everyone I text back home assures me everything is under control, all protesters have been dispersed, and it’s like “cualquier otro dia,” any other day. And I wonder what that means, any other day in my Tegucigalpa or post-election Tegucigalpa?

Almost an hour later, we finally begin boarding. The three of us are in the same boarding group so we stand in line together. The staff member who asks for our boarding passes suddenly says loud enough for everyone in line to hear and in perfect Spanish, “All of those that support Nasrrala make a line here, those with JOH, over there.” Everyone laughs. Leave it to Hondurans to find laughter even a crisis.

The flight is an extension of the airport gate. Everyone is awake and talking with those nearby about the civil unrest. I sit beside a man and woman in their fifties. The man wears a black fedora hat and vest, which make him look like a musician or some other form of star. He opens a bag of Wendy’s chicken nuggets and the smell of ketchup mixing with the perfume of the woman announce to me that this will be a long flight.

They definitely do not know each other, but after some short introductions, it takes them less than five minutes after being seated to jump right in. Who is worse of the two candidates? Who is involved in drug trafficking? Who has blood on his hands? Each of them constantly says they know someone who knows someone who once saw or heard something scandalous about one of the candidates. The words “drug paradise”, “Chavez”, “Mel”, “reelección”, “narco”, and “Juan Orlando” arise in every sentence or so. I try to sleep, because I know my life will be consumed by this during the next few weeks.

Civil Unrest, so tiring.

#

My mother, sister, and brother receive me at the airport. My brother, who is extremely tall, holds a bag of my favorite plantain chips over his head like a trophy. He grins as soon as he spots me across the crowd and, in that second, I’m convinced it’s all okay. The media must have been exaggerating how bad things are. We hug, and I tell them the lock on my suitcase has been broken, and worry that my stuff has been stolen. We open it right there, in the middle of the crowd. Everything seems to be there, but we know there’s nothing we could do even if it was completely empty. Everyone flying to Tegucigalpa knows there is a possibility of being robbed before ever leaving the airport, and that, as with most robberies, the wisest thing is to cooperate.

Stepping out of the airport I joke, “Hmm. Smells like gas and burning tires.”

They chuckle. I take them in for real, trying to spot any indication the situation has changed or hurt them. They don’t seem to look over their shoulders nor to roll up their windows any faster at stoplights. My mother, who like most mothers is breathtakingly beautiful in the eyes of her daughter, is her usual

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beautiful self. She's gained a little weight, but other than that, she's still as strong and young as I remember. My brother, on the other hand, has lost more than 30 pounds, but I knew he had been boxing for months. He looks even taller than when I left, but still his jolly self. May, my sister, is just taller and prettier. They look fine, not war-struck or anything, not even civil unrest-struck. Just fine. I breathe a little lighter.

We leave the airport and try to decide where to lunch. I'm to choose, but the last thing on my mind is food. I'm dumbfounded staring out the window. Everything is different. Gas stations and malls and restaurants are covered with metallic curtains, fences, wood planks. Most of these places have some form of poster outside advertising they're open, even if it doesn't look like it. Whatever is not covered has either been destroyed or vandalized. "FUERA JOH" most walls scream. "ES PA' FUERA QUE VAS", scream others. One in plain black spray paint stands out to me. It's a heart that has a heartbeat line coming out of it, for a certain length it's the usual peaks and lows you would see in a hospital heartbeat monitor, but it suddenly turns into a straight line, as in death. Besides it, it reads "LINEA CONTINUA = MUERTE", continuous line equals death.

"Is there like, a safe place we can have lunch? Like, shouldn't we be going home or something?" I ask my family.

"Uhm, why?" my sister responds. I

realize none of them have been staring out at the street like I have. They have been singing along with some Shakira song on the radio the whole time and glued to their phones. Even my mother, the driver.

"I don't know? The protests? I don't want to get stuck or mugged or something. At least not with all my stuff in the car." I respond, feeling dumb because of the looks I'm getting.

"If we do get stuck in some protest or something we just pay the war passage and get to go through," my brother says. His a tone implies absolute normality.

"War passage?"

"It's like 300 lempiras, you give it to the people in the protests and they let you through" he explains.

"So we have to pay to get places? Pay to use the streets?"

"It's not everywhere, just some places. Like to go to El Hatillo and, sometimes, in el Anillo Periferico at night"

"Why are people out at night? I don't understand. Aren't they scared? Aren't you?"

I expect them to collectively sigh. To all turn to me as if realizing for the first time how messed up this situation is. I expect maybe a tear or two. But none of this happens. Instead, my sister laughs.

"Que exagerada," says one of my siblings.

"Life goes on, Bessie. We can't stop living because of them," my mom concludes.

And so we go to lunch.  
Civil unrest, so trivial.

#

We decide on the same place we always choose on special occasions. Finding a parking spot takes more than 15 minutes, as always. The place is full, as always. It takes half an hour to get our food, as always. The windows are covered in wooden planks, as never.

"I'm surprised places are open at all," I say, "and people are not in their homes locked up."

"People got to eat. You think Juan Orlando or Mel will pay them for the days they don't work?" Mom says, not even glancing up from her phone.

We go through our order of 18 buffalo wings in less time than it took to park secretly competing to get more wings than the others. I drop buffalo sauce on my white pants. My mom rolls her eyes playfully.

We eat, we leave, then we drive around and complain about the heat. The streets still smell like shit and the vendors still knock at every car window. The phrase "FUERA JOH"—a call for the current president illegally reelecting himself to go away, to leave, to be taken out of power—has always been spray-painted on walls. The young boys at the stoplight who juggle machetes or swallow gasoline to blow out fire, just to get five lempiras, are still there; still unable to afford food or an education. After a while, I can't tell the new civil unrest apart from the old.