ALSO BY EULA BISS

The Balloonists

Notes from No Man's Land

AMERICAN ESSAYS

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For my baby,
who doesn't have a name yet.

Babylon

The hanging gardens were built for a homesick wife. Amytis of the Medes found the flat, dry land of Babylon depressing, and so her gardens were planted on terraces to look like hillsides.

"The air in California," my cousin once told me in New York, "smells like flowers." At the time, I took this as nostalgia for her home, but when I moved to California I found that it was true, especially in Oakland, where bougainvillea climbed telephone poles and huge hibiscus flowers poured out over the front yards of all the little houses.

The people of Babylon did not grow figs or grapes or olives, wrote Herodotus, but the land of Assyria was so rich that the fields of grain produced two hundred–fold or even three hundred–fold. He is thought to have exaggerated.

My first disappointment in California was the park. At the end of the summer it was a wasteland of brittle shrubbery. But the

winter rains would make the park green, and I would learn that it was full of gardens.

Their exile in Babylon, their captivity, was, for the Jews, both a punishment and a promise. It was through this exile that God would deliver his people.

Palm trees were all I saw as my plane landed in California, and palm trees were all I could see there for a long time. The palm trees were how I knew I was a long way from home.

There was a garden in the park called the Desert Garden, where African bottle trees and pencil trees and strange succulents grew. At midday this garden was hot and still, the yellow dirt paths were pounded hard, and almost all the plants were scarred from graffiti. There were messages etched into the leaves of the agaves and up the trunks of the saguaros, between the spines. Most were declarations of love: "Edgar R Te Amo Rosa," "Sang Love Thuy," "Victoria y Bernardo," "Lilia + Maryus," "Isidro y Blanca ♥ nuestro hija Leslie."

Plants deal with their wounds differently than we do. A cut on a plant will never heal, it will simply be sealed off or, at best, grown over. On one of our first days in California, my sister picked up the bright red fruit of a cactus from the ground and its tiny spines were in her fingers, swelling, for days.

"By their fruits ye shall know them," Matthew tells us. "Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?"

My sister and I drove out into the desert, only to discover that it was not, as I had imagined, empty. It was full of ocotillos and saguaros and crucifixion thorns.

I came to the fantasy of California early, twenty years before I moved there, because it was the place where my cousins lived. In third grade I wrote to the Oakland Chamber of Commerce and received, in the mail, a map of the city. This was in the eighties, when the crack houses of Oakland were still crack houses, not high-rent apartments. I pored over the map of Oakland, although the lines of it meant nothing to me then.

Oakland was advertised as a "garden city" by its postwar boosters. "Workmen," read one advertisement, "find happiness in their garden-set homes. . . . Their children are healthy in the mild, equable climate." The factories wanted workers who would not leave looking for something better.

But Americans always leave. We are a migrant people, a people of diasporas and exiles.

The two great migrations of the twentieth century, the migrations that made the landscape I was born into, were the migration of blacks to the cities and the migration of whites to the suburbs.

In the postwar decades, industry migrated too. The General Motors and Ford and Chevy plants left Oakland for the suburbs, and New York's textile district emptied.

The metaphor of Babylon, already employed by preachers and Rastafarians, entered, in the 1960s, the vocabulary of black politics. Babylon could stand for any city—for New York, for Oakland, for California, for the United States—for capitalism, for imperialism, or simply for excess. "It was often an elusive metaphor," Robert Self writes, "but it captured the profound cynicism engendered by decades of liberal failure as well as the remarkably optimistic belief in rebirth, in beginning again."

The fall of the city of Babylon was also the end of that particular captivity for the Jews. A reminder that there is always some promise in destruction.

Certain desert succulents can be forced to bloom by withholding water. And other plants can be forced to bloom with cold, or with cutting.

"For the Panthers and other black radicals," Robert Self writes, "the industrial garden of midcentury had become Babylon—a false city that had to be remade to stave off collapse."

By the seventies, landlords in New York City were abandoning their buildings. Squatters were taking over vacant tenements on the Lower East Side—patching roofs, rewiring electricity, building open fires, carrying buckets of water from fire hydrants, clearing the bricks and tires off empty lots to grow vegetables. On some blocks, they simply threw Christmas-tree ornaments full of wildflower seeds over the chain-link fences to break on the rubble. Seed bombs, they called these. And they called themselves homesteaders.

Meanwhile, exurbs. Penturbs. Boomburbs. Technoburbs. Sprinkler cities.

To flee within your own nation is to create a kind of captivity for yourself. A self-imposed exile. And so, the despair of the suburbs.

But to call it flight is to acknowledge only the fear and to ignore the other motivations, particularly the government subsidies—the highways, the mortgages, the tax breaks, the American dream.

I long, even now, to live in a place where I can have my own garden.

Because it is so sheltered by tall buildings, and so warmed by the "urban heat island effect," the climate of New York City is particularly suited to gardens of exile. The callaloo of Jamaica grows there, and the okra of Georgia, the peach tree of South Carolina and the tropical hibiscus.

Nonnative plants are sometimes called "invaders." Or, if we like them, "exotics." The apple tree, for one, is an exotic.

"The American traders and trappers who began settling in California as early as 1826 were leaving their country for a remote Mexican province, Alta California," writes Joan Didion. "Many became naturalized Mexican citizens. Many married into Mexican and Spanish families. A fair number received grants of land from the Mexican authorities." But when the

American immigrants rebelled against the Mexican government, most of them had been in California for less than a year.

Palm trees are not native to California. They come from Mexico, from Brazil, from Australia, from Costa Rica, from China, from Africa, from India, from Cuba—from, it seems, everywhere in the world except California.

Americans began their acquisition of Mexico by simply moving there. Even after the Mexican government prohibited American immigration to Texas, Americans continued to cross the border illegally. Stephen Austin, the "Father of Texas," urged Americans to come to Mexico, "passports or no passports."

After half of Mexico was claimed by the United States in 1848, thousands of Mexicans found themselves immigrants without ever having moved. In California, they outnumbered Americans by ten to one. They were made citizens of the United States, but they would, in the decades following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, lose most of their land to drought, squatters, taxes, and American courts.

Now, some Americans fear a *reconquista* of the Southwest.

The iconic palms that line the streets and boulevards of Southern California are dying of age and disease. They were planted when the cities were young, and the cities are no longer young.

Oakland was once a woodland of oaks. It was named *Encinal,* "oak land," by the Spanish rancher who owned it before the gold rush.

In Los Angeles, the rows of dying palms along the boulevards may soon be replaced by oaks.

Almost two million more people left California in the 1990s than came there from the rest of the country. They went, mostly, to the mountain states, to Colorado, Montana, Idaho. "Lifestyle migrants," they were called. A native Californian who left for Idaho told *USA Today,* "I was getting tired of traffic, graffiti, dirty air."

But graffiti, we all know, is not a reason to leave the place where you were born.

"A lot of people coming in from California," observed a professor at the University of Montana, "are coming in for 'urban dread' reasons."

In the nineties, after New York had resisted collapse and the land on the Lower East Side became valuable again, the city began to bulldoze gardens on empty lots to make way for new buildings. By then, the gardens had stone paths and goldfish ponds and grape trellises and roses.

Graffiti is one way to claim a place you do not own. And so is planting a garden. Because we are all forever in exile, or so the story goes, from the original garden.

Date palms belong to the genus *Phoenix,* and in California they rise from the ashes of conquest. *Phoenix canariensis* is the Canary Island date palm, brought by the Franciscan priest who founded the mission that became San Diego, and *Phoenix roebelenii* is the pygmy date palm, and *Phoenix dactylifera* is the true date palm.

Some of the community gardens of lower Manhattan had already been razed when I moved to New York, but there was still a hanging garden in the old meatpacking district—the elevated train tracks, no longer in use, had grown tall weeds and wildflowers.

"The daughter of Babylon," Jeremiah tells us, "is like a threshing-floor, it is time to thresh her: yet a little while, and the time of her harvest shall come."

My cousin and I stood together once, by the Long Island Railroad tracks, under a sign that read "Babylon." As I looked down the long gray tracks netted with electric lines, my cousin looked up at the sign and said, "Well, they call it what it is out here."

My grandmother keeps a garden on the graves of her parents, who came all the way from Poland to die in New York. Her most precious plants grow there, in the most permanent place she knows. She gave me some lilies of the valley from that garden, and I planted them in the shade of my father's house in the suburbs not long before he moved away and I left for California.

"They tended to accommodate any means in pursuit of an uncertain end," Joan Didion writes of the pioneer women in her family, the women who went West. "They tended to avoid dwelling on just what that end might imply. When they could not think what else to do they moved another thousand miles, set out another garden: beans and squash and sweet peas from seeds carried from the last place. The past could be jettisoned, children buried and parents left behind, but seeds got carried."

I spent my first summer in New York City walking through the gardens of Far Rockaway, gardens that covered entire blocks forgotten by the city. They had paths of old carpet between rows of sunflowers. I walked through gardens in Harlem and the Bronx full of beads and candles and statues of the Virgin Mary enshrined in little wooden *casitas.* One man told me that he had everything he needed to survive Y2K in his garden.

I heard a rumor in California, which I never had occasion to test, that if you were stranded out in the desert, you could cut off the top of a barrel cactus and find a reservoir of fresh water within.

Next to the highway running through the desert outside San Diego, there were gallon jugs of water buried for those trying to make their way into the country on foot. A priest from LA had brought the jugs of water to the desert in his minivan and buried them with the help of volunteers. The water was marked with blue flags bleached by the sun, and some jugs were buried where bodies had been found. That this water had been

brought all the way out there and was truly under those blue flags seemed as impossible to me as the telephone poles that persisted through the heart of the desert.

The hanging gardens of Babylon may never have existed. Herodotus never mentions them, and they are absent from the Babylonian records. But the other defining feature of the city, its immense walls, described by Herodotus as 80 feet thick and 320 feet high, were real enough to crumble with time.