

from *The Brush*

Ester lives with Pablo,
lives off the land like him,
tends to their animals,
believes in the evil eye, says it's nothing
but other people's envy,
that's why you shouldn't let babies be seen too much
after they're born.

You also need
to note the time and place:
locate their star
and track it carefully each year.

Ester is patient on the phone:
she spends hours listening
to other people's troubles.

She has a radio from '85 she switches on at lunch,
can kill an animal with a single blow.

Her favorite thing:
eating clementines on the porch.

There's a sweetness in Ester's eyes,
her rounded face,
she knows who people's children are:
when she goes down into the village
everybody tells her their secrets.

Pablo and Ester live up in the hills,
not too far from the ocean.
Their children all moved to the city
and never learned to tend the animals.

Pablo works on Wednesdays and Fridays
peeling tobacco leaves,
walks back through a forest of guayacans.

Sometimes he gathers strange-shaped rocks
and tucks them in his pocket
with chamomile flowers that Ester likes
and sticks them in a beer bottle once he's home.

They have a Rottweiler,
a cat that mews at the front door:
he misses the kids, says Pablo of the cat and not himself.

Ester gets up early to make coffee,
strains it through a black stocking,
the sun's still hidden.

Pablo carries tobacco leaves
in his arms like ruana cloth.

He also knows exactly when
they can be cut:
they're pale, round-edged,
yellow-veined.

For some time now
he's felt a heavy change pressing the air,
and can't explain it.
Like when
he walks through town at night,
and when he hears the animals
can't sleep.

Meanwhile, the daily tasks at hand:
I called you yesterday, he tells his oldest son,
who says a half-asleep hello when he picks up:

what are you doing, why didn't you answer me?

A helicopter roar
wakes Pablo from his nap.

He goes into the yard and sees white papers
tumbling down like snow:

EAT YOUR HENS AND SHEEP AND LIVE LIFE
TO THE FULLEST THIS YEAR
BECAUSE THE END IS COMING

He feels the heat between his eyes.

Best to keep his hands busy,
pace around the house,
shuffle documents.

Fear settles
like a cat in his throat.
Best to crumple them up,
get rid of them outside.

steps, thirteen,
one and three,
not the best number,

best not tell her,
it's always better not to know.