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*Cuando la Historia duerme, habla en sueños:
en la frente del pueblo dormido el poema es
una constelación de sangre.*

*When History sleeps, it speaks in dreams: on
the forehead of the sleeping people, the poem is
a constellation of blood.*

—Octavio Paz

*“Hacia el poema (Puntos de partida)”
“Toward the poem (Starting points)”*

The needless, widespread suffering—of the pandemic, of unemployment, of violence in the street—has woken some fundamental questions that might otherwise have remained dormant: what is a government for if it refuses to promote the general welfare, much less domestic tranquility? What are political parties for if one of them refuses to argue with intellectual honesty for its principles, if they seem to have traded in those principles for power? What are the police for if they refuse to protect and serve? In the United States 132,000 deaths and still climbing. George Floyd murdered in Minneapolis, Tony McDade in Tallahassee, Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia, and more and more and countless more. Rubber bullets, tear gas, batons. Next to these crises, it hardly seems commensurate to ask: what is art for? When the *North American Review* was founded in 1815, the editors firmly believed it was their duty to discover, promote, and shape a uniquely American literature, anxious to prove their worth against Old World models of artistic excellence. They were the educated elite of Harvard, a handful of young affluent (need it be said “white”?) men, “the wise and the good” who knew exactly what art was for. Their editorial policies were decidedly conservative and cautious, on the question of slavery at best agnostic. Their chapter advances the plot of a long nationalistic narrative of white supremacy and privilege that even now its rapt audience has trouble recognizing as a fiction, something first imagined and then brought vividly, terribly to life.

After living within this fiction for so long, how is it possible to tell another story? After recognizing the fiction for what it is, how is it possible not to try? “When History sleeps,” writes Octavio Paz in 1951, “it speaks in dreams.” This is what art is for: to dream more deeply, more beautifully, more strangely, more justly. If artists are to take seriously the founders’ call to form a more perfect union, they must understand it as an aesthetic imperative to create something different, to see anew, to revise—a job that writers and editors should be well-prepared for. The Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky’s oft-cited technique of defamiliarization is not meant