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Report on Sabbatical Leave, Fall 2020

The manuscript I completed during my previous sabbatical--*Stargazing in the Atomic Age*--was published in January of this year. (It was reviewed by the Los Angeles Review of Books as well as the Jewish Book Council and Kirkus, where it received a Kirkus star.) This essay collection focuses upon a group of mid-twentieth-century Jewish intellectuals working in the United States: painters, mathematicians, writers, physicists, and composers, most of whom were immigrants or the children of immigrants, and whose extraordinary faith in thinking and refusal to give in to despair during the apocalyptic period of WWII might, I hope, throw light upon how we might tackle our own very difficult era.

During my most recent sabbatical leave I focused upon two activities. The first was to prepare and give a series of talks and readings from *Stargazing*, which I have done either virtually or in person at the following venues: UC Berkeley's Center for Jewish Studies (recorded here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=heZcj7Y65Ig>), Or Zarua, New York City (available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQKe9Gb0MCI>), a writing colleague's summer class at Dartmouth ("Literary Journalism"); and, closer to home, for Writers at Sonoma. (I'll also be appearing virtually in Tampa, FL on October 27 and in an SSU colleague's writing course on October 11.)

That said, my primary labor has been to move closer to finishing my second essay collection, formerly called "At the Borders of the Known World" and which I have retitled "An Aria for Insects and Other Essays." The pieces in this collection range across

the natural world (and include, as part of nature, the nature of humans). One section of this book contains a quartet of essays that focus on the classical elements: earth, air, fire, and water that has expanded into a quintet of pieces. I had already published the earth, air, and water essays. During my leave, I researched, wrote, and published one essay on fire (“Firefall,” *Wildsam Field Guides*) and researched and wrote a second piece on fire, “Air Traffic,” which is currently out for review at three literary quarterlies.

Lastly, I concluded research on the titular essay, “An Aria for Insects.” I am currently drafting this piece. Whilst on leave, I also developed an idea for a new essay (“Plumb, Square, Level”), which will explore an aspect of human bioengineering: our joints. Once I have a polished version of “Aria” ready and have researched and written the latter piece, I will seek representation for the collection.

I was thrilled to have received leave in the Fall of 2020, which provided me the gift of time in which to prepare and deliver four talks, write two essays, publish one of these, research a third piece, and conceive a plan for a fourth--the latter the final work to be completed before I seek representation for this second collection. Without question, the research and writing of these pieces informed my spring 2021 teaching and will inform the classes I teach this coming spring as well.