

Island of the Orange Poppy

by aviana wells

*This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me –
The simple News that Nature told –
With tender Majesty
Her Message is committed
To Hands I cannot see
For love of Her – Sweet – countrymen
Judge tenderly – of Me
- Emily Dickinson*

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Ch. 1 *My Island*

Nearly my whole life I have lived in a valley. We are surrounded by mountains to the north, east, and south, but the Pacific Ocean cradles us to the west. There are rolling hills dotted with cows and horses, and when spring rains arrive the grasses become bright green. The seasonal winds cause the grasses to billow like waves, transforming the landscape into a turbulent sea of golden greens that illuminate under the California sun. Surely, the sun does not shine the same here as it does elsewhere. Wildflowers like the California poppy appear in great abundance setting the vast grasslands and mountain peaks aflame with an orange glow. They are complimented by the blues and purples of succulent lupine – a flower nearly as iconic to me as the poppy. When spring showers have ceased and the vibrant greens fade away, the grasslands become a radiating honey-blonde, exuding a similar fragrance, and become ever more striking against the azure sky. As the sun reflects down upon the land, the grasses appear to sparkle and mirror the golden hue of our big bright star. This is the Golden State, after all.

This valley is carpeted by sprawling wine grape vineyards – Pinot Noir grapes being the most sought after. Oak groves and savannas extend between hill crests while individual oaks stud the mountains, offering shelter and food to the many creatures that inhabit the vast landscape. I often see the yellow-billed magpie – with its white, black, and iridescent blue plumage, resting along ranch fences and oak woodlands that line the local roads. The yellow-billed magpie is among the few bird species that “plants” oak acorns to later be consumed. While some acorns go unrecovered, few more may sprout into seedlings, and if resilient enough, will take permanent root in the landscape. This bird is also one of only two endemic California bird species, the other being the Santa Cruz Island scrub jay whose favorite food is the endemic island oak tree – *Quercus tomentalla*. Today, there are 20 different species of oak that enrich California’s native flora, though ancient California had even more oak species. My home valley features nearly half of these oaks, with the evergreen Coast Live Oak and the deciduous Blue Oak and Valley Oak being the most prominent. Some of these trees are centuries old and likely provided shade and immeasurable value to the early Chumash Native Americans that once prospered on this land. This is the Santa Ynez Valley.

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Wild turkey crossings are common and scattered deer often graze in the meadows. I love to see the fresh fawns, still dusted with white spots, frolicking amongst the lush grasses. I have seen foxes and bobcats traversing the landscape too, the latter of which appear most exotic with their spotted and dashed fur coat and tufted sideburns. Coyotes make their appearance most often through sound in a symphony of howls to the moon each night which can be beautiful in its natural majesty but also harrowing. Bears also call the surrounding mountains home. One recent evening, a near 500-pound black bear was spotted in the local village of Solvang, possibly searching for a hot *aebleskiver* or perhaps a trinket from one of the many gift shops. He was cornered behind The Mole Hole, immobilized, and scooped up where he was then transported ten miles out of town back into the wilderness. He was healthy and safe, and the National Park Service released fantastic portrait photographs of the bear as he sat upright in a baby cobra position in the bed of his captor's truck.

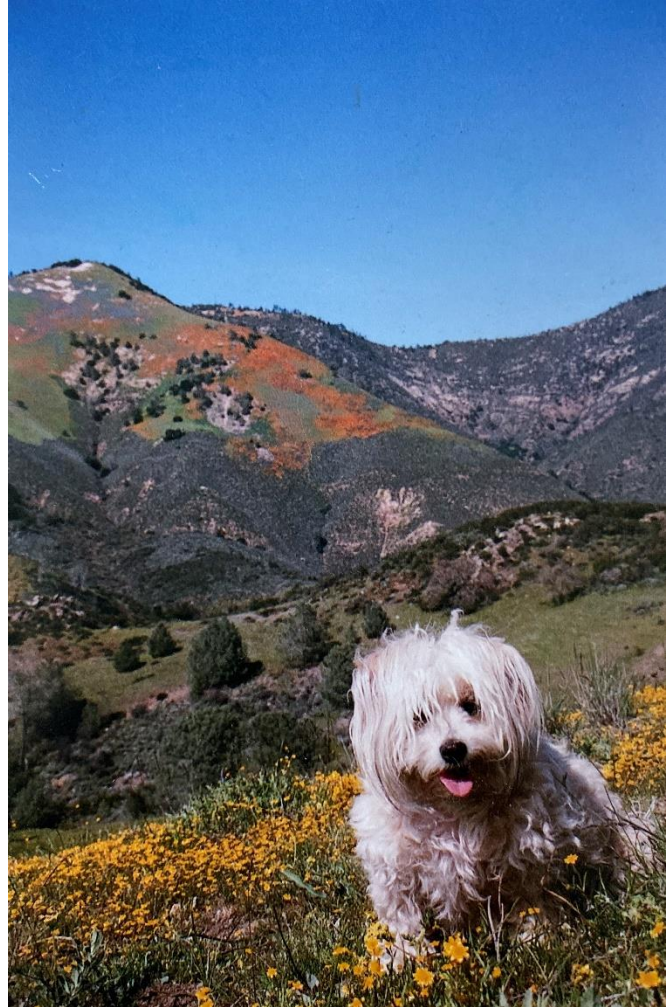
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CREDIT: <https://www.ksby.com/news/local-news/bear-found-in-downtown-solvang-captured-released>



Shadowing the valley is the Los Padres National Forest, rich with plant and animal diversity. Sandstone and ancient fossil oyster beds compose the structure of these mountains, evidence of our similar aqueous origin. Views of the grand Pacific and the fertile Santa Ynez enchant the mountain peaks and forestland where numerous hidden waterfalls are to be discovered. The mountains and valley conjoin to form a paradisaal Eden, where lush oak woodlands and rock faces bathe in marine fog at dawn and kiss the celestial canopy at dusk. It is no wonder the local Chumash settled in this landscape and were so compelled to paint their imagery in the sandstone caves of this mysterious oasis (the pictographs even more mysterious as no one can decipher their original meaning has been lost) so many centuries ago.

*The Mountains stood in Haze –
The Valleys stopped below
And went or waited as they liked
The River and the Sky.
At leisure was the Sun –
His interests of Fire
A little from remark withdrawn –
The Twilight spoke the Spire,
So soft upon the Scene
The Act of evening fell
We felt how neighborly a Thing
Was the Invisible.
- Emily Dickinson*



A meandering highway route brings travelers to Lake Cachuma – a man-made reservoir that was once home to a bounty of steelhead and trout, but a past and most persistent drought decimated fish populations and now the fish have to be periodically introduced back in. Continuing over the mountains, travelers are connected from the valley to the Pacific Ocean coastline, Santa Barbara, and beyond. The fluorescent, non-native mustard flower amplifies the vibrancy of the coast, providing a magnificent contrast against the cerulean Pacific that mirrors back white-gold sunrays. There is a legend that Franciscan missionaries scattered the mustard seeds along the El Camino Real, marking this route and connecting the missions. Like a compass, sight of this yellow flower was meant to guide travelers across streams and marshlands that would flood during winter rains and high tides.

There is a presence that reverberates across the landscape when seeing a bounty of this yellow flower as well. The land here has a complicated past involving the Spanish missionaries and the Native Chumash Indians who once prospered in the valley and up and down the coastline. In 1769, a Spanish-led expedition resulted in the establishment of several missions in Chumash territory, decimating the Chumash population. It was not until 1901 that a reservation for the Chumash would be developed, right in Santa Ynez Valley, and today it is the only federally recognized Chumash reservation. Less than a mile from my home, today there is a great big casino on the reservation that draws in hundreds of visitors each day. Every now and again we go down to the casino and play blackjack, sometimes with winnings and sometimes with empty pockets. The accumulated earnings the Chumash Casino receives from visitors like myself provide the local Chumash with economic stability and independence. And although the casino has its share of critics, tribal leaders today recognize that it has ceased unemployment and provides Chumash members with health care and educational opportunities. Furthermore, they work ceaselessly towards acquiring more local lands that were once inhabited or considered sacred to the early Chumash tribes.

However, just as there were in the past, today there are many who want to claim the valley and surrounding mountains as their own. Incorporated into the valley are several small towns, including Solvang which was settled by Danish immigrants in 1911. During the 1940s, Solvang was severely stressed with the onset of World War II. In January 1947, the Saturday Evening Post magazine published a feature article about the “spotless Danish village that blooms like a rose in California’s charming Santa Ynez Valley.” The enticing article with its stunning photographs started a stream of visitors to Solvang, which became known as the “Danish Capital of America.” In continuing to draw in visitors and keep up with their expectations, Solvang decided its look should reflect the town’s Danish culture. New buildings were constructed in the Danish provincial style – older buildings were re-modeled and Danish-style windmills were built. “Main Street” became “Copenhagen Drive,” and other streets were given Danish names. Today, Solvang alone draws in millions of tourists annually.

Wine grape cultivators, cattle ranchers, and other agricultural establishments dominate the local landscapes and present-day economy too. Nearly two centuries of ranching and farming has led to the development of a tightly knit community; and with the addition of numerous fine

dining restaurants, art galleries, boutique hotels, and theatres there emerges a sophistication that adds to the unique character of the valley. Although there are generations of families that have persisted here and plenty others seeking a simpler way of life, there is a constant influx of newcomers with mere pretenses for a rural lifestyle. And I wonder, what will become of the valley as older families are pushed out and new developments become more prevalent? Underneath the façade of *fine* consumption and caricaturized cultures, there are individuals still holding onto a distant landscape and way of life that preceded the overwhelming artificial lifestyles of today.

Today, the valley is quiet. The ongoing viral pandemic of COVID-19 has closed the local shops and wineries, the playgrounds are caution-taped off, and the swarms of tourists are nearly nonexistent. Terms like “social distancing” and “new normalcy” have become a part of everyday vernacular, while hand sanitizer and face masks are items no one leaves the house without. No one shakes hands with strangers anymore and visits to Grandma have long since ceased. I am unable to determine if someone is smiling or frowning behind their masks because even their eyes appear stoic to me. In this post-crowd world, I am reminded of an earlier time when this valley was a cow town people fled from, or when just the Chumash resided here, and even earlier before that when this landscape was inhabited by only the plants, soils, and animals. Have we dispossessed the land just as much as we have dispossessed other humans? When we humans are all gone, will our disinvolvement in the greater ecosystem disrupt an essential predator-prey cycle, or will nature realign and become more balanced?

At the end of May, I will be moving away from my homeland and across the country to a new “island” in Clemson, South Carolina. This impending voyage presents me with many questions about this new unknown southern landscape, but it also forces me to reflect on the “island” in which I currently inhabit. My great-grandfather lived to be 102 years old and is considered lucky, but really our time on Earth is short. My time in my valley-island is even shorter and although I understand I must act quickly and with strategy, it is just as important for me to slow down and act intuitively. If I remain in a certain routine and an isolated landscape long enough, daily life can begin to feel stagnant. Novel experiences, like traveling to a new landscape, can revive my perspectives and outlook towards life. Being in nature emphasizes time’s ceaseless forward flow through the changing seasons and life cycles of plants and

animals. It is here I realize the important presence of the landscape and its ability to alter how we experience time. Quantum mechanics teaches us that “the world is ever so slightly but uncorrectably out of focus, that there are no absolutely precise answers”, but I know that if there is wisdom to be found surely it is found in the land.

Ch. 2 Island Excursion #1 (April 11, 2020)

There is a park nearby that my dog, Lil, and I frequent most often. The park is called Sunny Fields, undoubtedly inspired by the local Danish village of Solvang (Solvang means “sunny field”). There is a large playground constructed of wood and it is reminiscent of a medieval castle with cylindrical towers and winding stairs. Hand-drawn paintings of flowers and farm animals, like chickens and cows, decorate the façade. There are slides, monkey bars, a hang glider, a row of swings including a large tire swing. Instead of sand, there are wood chips for floor covering. A small gingerbread house structure sits near the center of playground. It is canopied by multicolored roof shingles – red, blue, green – and the exterior walls are embellished with candy canes and a small gingerbread character. Surrounding this are spring riders – a royal blue whale and a little white pony that oddly resembles Lil. The park features picnic tables and barbeques, a baseball diamond in one corner, and a volleyball sand court in the opposite southwest corner. Between these points is a large expansive grassy field. This is where we go.

Every week we go to this park and there Lil can run freely through the wide, open field. Today is no different. She enjoys skipping through the grasses which has been left unattended to for the last several weeks. It is long and wild and makes running through harder for Lil, but she enjoys it and romps like a baby white rhino endlessly. After a while, she will take some time to sit still under the bright sun and close her eyes, as if meditating. Together we lie down in the grass, picking at mushrooms and dandelions, and peering into the world of pill bugs and more microscopic critters. When we arise, I look back and see that the warmth and weight of our bodies has created a soft impression in the grasses like a rabbit *meuse* – further proving that we are both formed by and are active shapers of the land itself. This soft weave of grasses is like a physical memory belonging to the land, reminding me of Mnemosyne the goddess of Memory

and bearer of the Nine Muses – which is true in matters of mythology and neuroscience. What else does the land remember? When we leave the valley in May, will the land remember us?

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picking at mushrooms and dandelions,
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Lil has small triangular shaped ears, like the local peak of Grass Mountain, which are draped in long strands of white hair with black highlights. When she is alerted, her ears pop up and she instantly transforms into a papillon, though genetically she is a bouchon-chihuahua mix. Lil and I found each other over ten years ago while I was living with my older sister, who was then a young and unwed, new mother. Lil was a stray, roaming in the middle of the street. Her hair was long, dreaded, and caked in dirt; her toenails were long curled over. She either had been

highly neglected or had been living on the streets for an extremely long time. It must have been the former because she was so small and helpless -- there is no way she could have survived long in the streets. My sister's house was situated behind another house and accessible only by a dirt-road alley. I remember we were driving down the alley and heading for the mall, and we as approached the street, there Lil was in the middle. I immediately jumped out of the car, eager to help her (Santa Maria has a huge stray dog problem). I approached slowly and said softly, "Come here little dog." I will never forget the way she looked up at me with those dark, glossy, expressive eyes. It was as if she was asking me to take her with me, and so I did. Just like that she became Little Dog, Lil for short. And although my stay at my sister's house was cut short due to Lil's presence forcing Lil and I to relocate abruptly (long story, but imagine her baby-daddy who is a 7 ft, balding alcoholic with a loaded shotgun and doesn't like dogs), everything was meant to be.

I lie on my side and close my eyes every so often. Lil is contently sitting beside me, tongue out and sniffing the air as the breezes come through. She appears to be smiling. She feels safe with me, trusts me, and I know this. Does she feel lucky to be alive? I try to imagine what Lil's impressions are of the park and her surroundings. What are Lil's desires and memories?

What are Lil's desires?



A row of sycamore trees aligns the western side of the field. We love this row of trees. During the fall season the five-pointed leaves change to a deep red hue, before dropping and leaving the tree bare until late spring. Like a Christmas ornament, spherical flower heads hang down from the tree branches through the winter, then drop in the spring dispersing the seeds. I pick up a fallen flower head – it is a soft and fuzzy ball that breaks apart easily. Behind the trees, we follow a paved path that hugs the park and runs parallel to Alamo Pintado Road. As we approach the volleyball court, we become canopied by a grove of pine trees. The trees tower high above while their branches expand outwards at least 8 feet, spiraling in growth in Fibonacci ratios (this is true of the needles and cone scales too). The needles are a deep green and the tips of the branches feature lighter green needles; new spring shoots resembling candles decorate the trees. I take a trimming of the end of the branch where the deep green changes to the softer green. Before we leave, I plan to pick some white roses that are growing near the park entrance and arrange them in a vase at home with the pine foliage.

We take note of other visitors in the park, human and animal. A red-headed acorn woodpecker perches in one of the nearby trees while crows remain dispersed throughout the field. Crows are some of the most unusual creatures. Considered one of the most intelligent bird species, some traits crows are well-known for include their ability to make tools, remember human faces, and their commitment to one partner for life. There are arguments that crows may even hold burial rituals for other crows. Seemingly very emotional and sensitive creatures, it is always quite a sight to make these connections and then see them eating garbage or carrion on the side of the road. And yet I still feel a kinship to them. They are opportunists, and I liken myself to be one too.

The sky is overcast but bright silver, like a gleaming fish scale. Though all-black, the crows' feathers are iridescent, reflecting off the bright gray light of the afternoon. Lil stares at them inquisitively. When we return to the park each week, I wonder if the crows remember us. How long does their memory last? Do they recognize our faces?

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Every visit to the park we see the same humans with their dogs, but we only ever remember the dog's names. There is Noodle – a large, apricot-blond labradoodle – and his human is a large, tall man who is always wearing a cowboy hat. He's been in trouble with the law, as he says, followed by rambling. Then there is McGregor – a twelve-year-old black Labrador mix. An old dog, he hobbles through the park with a bit of a kink in his hip. His human is an old man, short, and always wearing a saddle bag to carry treats for McGregor. He has a gentle, friendly demeanor about him. The two old men find comfort in each other's company and when they are both present at the park, they will walk the loop together before retiring to the benches. They gaze out at the grassy field while the dogs meander through the surroundings. On our way back to the car, we pass by the men sitting in silence.

"Howdy," I holler.

"I like your bouquet," McGregor's human tells me.

"Oh, thank you," I blush, knowing I've been caught cutting up plants on public property.
"I couldn't help myself – I just love this color change."

“That’s the new growth,” McGregor’s human says.

I “oo and ahh” and we all stare at my fresh lootings. The men begin talking about the California redwoods and Noodle’s human begins a ramble about how his son lives near there, how wide the trees are compared to his son. The conversation evolves to talking about birds and Noodle’s human mentions an injured baby bird he had to leave on his porch. I tell him about a local woman who he can call in the future that rescues injured wild animals and nurses them to health before releasing them back to the wild.

“A while back she helped me with a grackle that flew into my window,” I tell him. This woman has also been in trouble with the local law and so begins another ramble of Noodle’s human.

“I can understand her, I’ve not always got along with the laws either.”

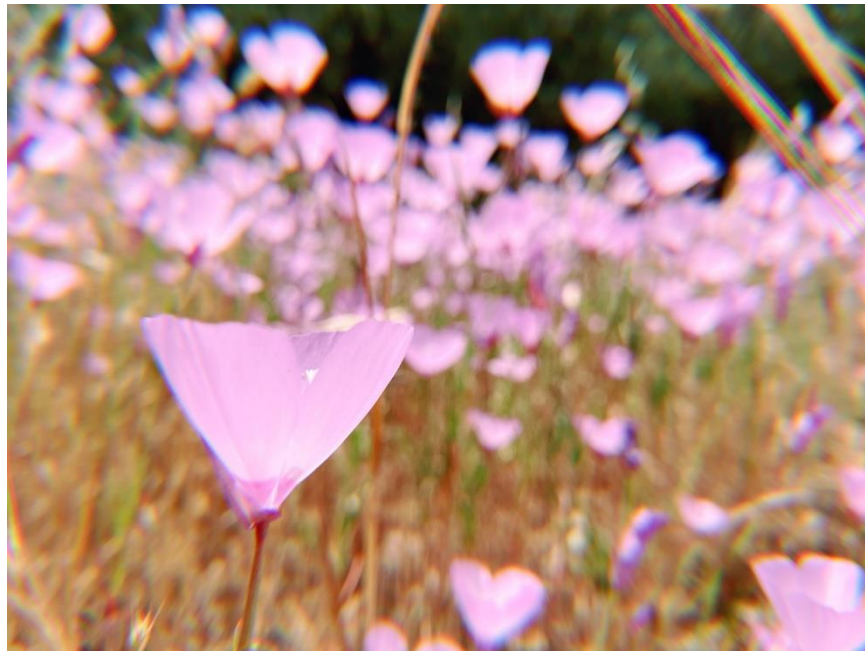
I realize now I must cut this conversation short or I will be standing here until the sun goes down and back up again. We exchange our farewells and I race over to the white rose bushes near the park entrance. I look back to see if anyone can see me, no one can. Then I hastily begin trimming roses from the bushes before heading home.

Ch. 3 Island Excursion #2 (May 9, 2020)

The drive out to Figueroa Mountain is quite scenic. It begins its course off Hwy 154 and down Figueroa Mountain Road. Private ranches and farms, including what was once Michael Jackson’s Neverland Ranch, make up most of the surrounding landscape before vast open fields open into wildlands. Fields of squash and cruciferous vegetables may abound on one side of the road, while the opposite will be home to cows and horses grazing in the grasslands. Though recent spring showers once transformed these fields and hills to an illuminating green, the rain has since ceased, leaving the grasses dry and blonde. The camel colored hills are rooted by deep green oaks and sycamores, while cows and horses stand and lay dispersed throughout.

The hike up Figueroa Mountain is even more scenic. Offering panoramic views of the San Rafael wilderness and the Santa Ynez Valley down below, hiking this mountain is surely

worth it. Besides the high-up views, what I find even more rewarding to witness are the spectacular wildflower displays and discovering other wildlife habitats. During an exceptionally wet spring, one would find the triangular peak of Grass Mountain a brilliant orange, blanketed by golden California poppies. A few weeks ago, you could still see poppies growing on the mountain, but today there are few. With my younger sister Darci as a companion, we decide to hike Lover's Loop – a four-mile trail which leads you up a hillside, through grassy meadows and oak-covered slopes. Known as Farewell to Spring, various pink-hued clarkia flowers are the most dominating on the trail, nature's way of telling us that spring is nearing its end. Clarkia are delicate flowers, faintly similar in shape to a California poppy, but are from separate families – clarkia is a member of the evening primrose family, Onagraceae, while the California poppy is from Papaveraceae.



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It is not quite summer yet here in the valley, so the weather is warm with a soft breeze. The air smells of sun-baked earth and sage – nowhere in the world smells quite like the California wilderness, and no candle can encapsulate this scent. Spring has enlivened the

mountains which act as the perfect stage for the theatre of nature. Snow melt has made the creeks full and flowing, harmonizing the orchestra of insects buzzing and twitter-patted birds. There are many hikers out today evident by how many cars are parked at the base of the mountain, but I hardly see nor do I ever hear anyone. The air is at once still and silent and yet so full of noise – dry grasses wavering, branches squeaking, the flap of a bird’s wing, the unfurling of a flower bud.



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Pitcher sage, mariposa lilies, and blue-eyed grass carpet open spaces off the trail. The plant ecology changes the higher you hike in elevation – different shrubs and trees appear and disappear. I notice the various ferns and miner’s lettuce drying up the further we go, while pine trees begin to dominate the oak woodlands. I wonder about the animals that have come before me on this trail today and who may be lingering, hidden, nearby. Stately oaks surround me, signifying the centuries before and the centuries after that they will endure. They stand firmly on

the hillsides, their languid branches faintly squeaking during the brush of a strong wind. How content these mountains are to stand alone without human interference. How harmonious the animals sound living in this wilderness.

Before I know it, we are standing at the highest point that offers a view on the Lover's Loop trail. The trail is caked and cracked from past rain pours and we are surrounded by golden meadows with grasses between knee and hip height. When I stand on this mountain and gaze out over the valley, I can feel the tremendous depth of time and I am reminded of my own impermanence in this landscape. The animals, the plants, and the land itself reverberate a tranquility and urgency simultaneously. A bird passes over and I imagine the endangered California condor who has slowly made its return to the area after nearly fifty years of absence. Today, great efforts are underway to protect local endangered creatures and restore their natural habitats, and I feel confident that local conservationists and residents will ensure that these mountains and the lower valleys will remain pristine for generations to come.

*A noiseless patient spider,
I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.
And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the
Spheres to connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile
Anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere,
O my soul.*

- Walt Whitman



Ch. 4 The Departure

This week I am moving out of my home and far away to the east coast for graduate school. I will be moving away from my special valley “island” and onto a different “island” located at the base of the Blue Ridge Mountains in South Carolina, another magical landscape rich with wildlife and mystery. Although I am excited for this next chapter of my life, the country is experiencing incredible chaos and instability, and the days ahead are full of uncertainty. Initiated by the wrongful death of a colored man named George Floyd, civil unrest prevails across the country as riots and protests take over freeways and city squares, burning down government buildings and symbols of capitalism. Grocery stores have closed, and city curfews have been issued. The goal for millions of citizens is to dismantle systemic and cultural racism that has plagued the country for generations. But it is more than that, and the American people are voicing for change in all facets of life; they do indeed desire a “new normal.” Meanwhile, the ongoing viral pandemic is still alive and well, preventing many from socializing and making it hard enough as it is to buy groceries. As if in a perpetual state of decay and loss, the United States is under intense stress. How will I fare in a new, relatively unknown landscape in the American South and thousands of miles away from my family residing on the California coast?

Last month I read an article entitled “The Coronation” by Charles Eisenstein where the author asks powerful questions about what kind of society and life we shall choose to follow moving forward from the aftermath of covid-19. He further suggests that covid-19 has “gifted us a reset.” He interprets the novel coronavirus pandemic as “a new coronation for all” – a phrase that really resonated with me and I have been reevaluating many different areas of my life since. Similarly, I too believe we are living in an era that can be used for dramatic positive change. But do we have the intelligence and courage to grasp these opportunities? What patterns of thought and physical activities will I take with me moving forward and which ones will retire into my past?

It is ironic that I find the most comfort in knowing that everything is temporary – the only thing you can count on is change which is the constant experience of loss and gain. For many, the idea of perpetual loss likely sounds excruciatingly painful, but we experience it everyday

through the loss of time and in memory-making. The art of photography – the infamous moment memorializer – is an excellent example. In his lyrical inquiries on photography in *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photograph*, Roland Barthes relates photography to the concept of death and the loss of time incessantly, analogizing cameras to clocks and the death of time. “Cameras,” he states, “were clocks for seeing.” Clocks serve as physical evidence of time; they transform time into an object by mechanizing and delineating time. Similarly, William Faulkner analogizes time and death in *The Sound and the Fury*: “Clocks sleigh time, time is dead as long as it is being clicked off by little wheels; only when the clock stops does time come to life”. Like clocks, cameras make objects out of their subjects through the freezing of moments in time. It is these frozen moments that symbolize the loss of time, the signifier in a photograph, thereby resulting in the death of time of the moment in which the photograph was taken, and the future death that has yet to occur: the future loss of time.

Time cannot break the bird's wing from the bird.

Bird and wing together

Go down, one feather.

No thing that ever flew,

Not the lark, not you,

Can die as others do.

-Edna St. Vincent Millay



As we take our final walk through the neighborhood, we listen to a little bird rehearse a list of different tunes, as if he is a radio and cannot decide what station to stay on. The early morning sun is shining brightly, and he is so small and so high up on an electrical wire that I cannot determine what type of bird he is. He impresses me with his musical repertoire and his ability to recall so many songs. As we squint up and listen, I wonder...What will I remember

most of the valley landscape that I am leaving behind? Will it be the local geography and wildlife such as the infinite pool of vineyards, the fields and mountains peaks clothed in California poppies, the mountain views, the Pacific ocean, or the birds like the mag-pie, the crows, or he on the wire... or will it be the more mysterious and less definable like the perfume of the California wilderness, the waving winds, the California sun and how it illuminates the grasses, or the old soul of the languid oak trees? The bird's presence reminds me that I cannot still time – change is inevitable. We all move through life to the beat of our drum, the pace of our own rhythm. The power I have comes through knowing that I can choose what song to play and how to play it, and this knowledge comes with me wherever I go. Surely, there is wisdom to be found in the land.

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*may the tide
that is entering even now
the lip of our understanding
carry you out
beyond the face of fear
may you kiss
the wind then turn from it
certain that it will
love your back may you
open your eyes to water
water waving forever
and may you in your innocence
sail through this to that*

- Lucille Clifton



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