

Loring and Wyton

It was a corner in Holmby Hills where friends of my parents lived who let me park in their driveway when I was living at home and commuting to UCLA. A few blocks east of campus in that luxury and leafy neighborhood, just the right walking distance for my meditative hikes under the trees that in springtime smelled like semen, the house was a place I never entered, nobody ever seemed home, but it made for a safe location where my days began and ended as a freshman whose intellect was just awakening and then a sophomore whose brain was catching fire under the influence of distant professors whose lectures in big halls and whose assignments were incendiary—Plato, Tolstoy, Rilke, Whitman, Chekhov, Blake, Cervantes—old white guys, teachers and writers alike, who razed my suburban boyhood to its naked vacancy only to reveal the most amazing universe I'd met in my slight years, a little twit who didn't have a clue but was hungry for everything opening on that campus—the books, which I could touch and all but possess, the beautiful girls beyond my reach, a worldly atmosphere brimming with possibility, the opening days of adulthood, dawn of something astonishing yet to come. Some teachers were even approachable and I took advantage of their office hours just to get close for a few minutes to someone living a life of the mind—I wanted to bring them home to show my folks, in those days of deadly dinners, that conversation was possible, that there was something worth discussing beyond the war, that what I was reading and thinking was so much more than academic, that minds were alive and so was I in a way I never understood before and didn't yet but lusted for. So that walking back to my car at the end of the day, under those seminal oaks of Wyton Drive, lugging my books in that clunky olive-green attaché case Grandma had given me and still too square to know how dorky I looked, poetry was taking possession of me.

Farmers Market

Four girls perched in a row on the pickup tailgate behind the blueberries are a sight for old eyes on a Saturday morning, their dangling legs keeping time to the bluegrass band serenading the shoppers and the farmers and the faux flâneurs out for a stroll in a parking lot turned country fair for a day. The pasta man offering bargains under his baseball cap, the Happy Boys and Dirty Girls coolly flaunting their greens, the gourmet olive oil entrepreneurs with their tempting bits of bread for dipping in little golden bowls, fruit purveyors with their sweet bright hills all take me home to a farm I've never known except in old poems by aging drunks nostalgic for imagined Edens remembered precisely and harvested in language alone. The barbeque dudes are frying bacon and that primal smell almost sends you swooning, but then a whiff of tamales takes you to the force field of some taco truck where you once stopped for a quick bite with your sweetie, and from there you are taken with the fresh scent of whole-grain sourdough loaves and the bakers' freshly tanned faces. Such mornings of local travel can scarcely be matched by trips to exotic lands where other versions of the same vendors, flowers whose names escape you casting equally chromatic aromas, abundant food for the eyes seduce you the same way, only here you are close to home where you will stash your bounty for a week of savoring. And here is where you feast your nose and ears and eyes on the fullness of a week's work, or a season's, brought to fruition. These neighbors you don't know, these sky-browned faces you almost recognize, these easily circulating people who could be anyone seem to be here forever, playing their mythic roles in the mundane rituals of exchange. Chocolate, that luxury, the essential fuel of coffee, earthy potatoes, sugar-snap peas, strawberries, bunches of basil, even this cool coastal overcast tell of warm days inland when under the spell of summer you could feel your nectar sweetening in the sun.

On the 101

Doing 80 along the dotted line through the lettuce fields of the Salinas Valley, a cropduster helicopter crossing overhead, and then what's left of the eucalyptus windbreaks shredded by a century of weather, and miles of grapevines tied up in every direction in military precision all the way to the foothills, and after that the rotting barracks of Camp Roberts, who am I to complain about the violations of this landscape, I'm driving a car, sucking the melted dinosaurs out of the earth like the oil derricks nodding near King City, and for the ten-thousandth time I marvel at what remains of the summery gold hills studded with oaks beyond the subdivisions and the shopping malls and the dust clouds plowed up by the food factories. There is still some blue sky between the cities, and compact discs in the dashboard to accompany my gloomy musings, and the Golden Gate stands shining someplace behind me and deeper south the Hollywood Freeway is choked up as ever as at the climax of a romantic movie, only instead of the stars snuggling on screen with swoony music on the soundtrack there are commuters cocooned in their cockpits with audiobooks or talk shows no less degenerate than mine. And so I stake my claim to this inspiring and disgraceful state with its poets subverting the schools, its acidhead techno-entrepreneurs replacing the razed orchards, its historic adobes, its missions long since leveled by time and restored in convincing facsimile, and further north its Luther Burbank Gardens and Frank Lloyd Seuss government centers and shady plazas lined with first-rate tasting rooms, and this long road connecting everything including the big rigs and the RVs, the Honda Civics and the red Ferraris, the Cadillac Escalades and Subaru Foresters and CHP cruisers speeding south and racing north as if there were someplace to go, and maybe there is, as I am rolling all these hours to see my Uncle Henry in Santa Barbara, he's ninety-six and still alive and we are grateful and relieved to know there is a King's Highway that links us across these hundreds of familiar miles.

Marriott Courtyard, Culver City

From the western windows of Suite 819 you have a long view of the 405 streaming at the limit in both directions on an ordinary Sunday in October. The light has a bright metallic glare, but if you stand close to the glass and look left, south through the haze toward LAX, there is a green expanse that soothes the eye: Hillside Memorial Park, the Jewish cemetery with the statue of Al Jolson atop his tomb in a circle of columns that give the surrounding lawn a center—all the flat gravestones sunk in the grass arranged as if in homage to the entertainer. Amid the agitated landscape of Los Angeles the grassy slopes of Hillside are anomalously calm while the city vibrates with barely contained aggression, even on the Sabbath. I regard the eighth-floor view with wonder because just northwest of Jolson I can see where my parents are buried—my father's ashes first, my mother's later—and of all the hotels in greater LA this is the one where I have come to see Louise, who raised me in my early years while my folks were out making their fortune. Although she quit when I was seven to start her own family, we've never lost touch and now she is ninety and blind, and Bobby, her adopted son, is taking care of her with help from Melanie, his lady friend; Phillip, one of Louise's former foster children, a middle-aged mentally handicapped alcoholic, rounds out the family of four displaced from their home in South LA by a conflagration started by Dominique, another foster child, who was smoking crack last week and burned the house down, just like that—a house where Louise had lived for more than sixty years. It was insured, thank God, though they are cleansed of their possessions and, until the insurance company finds them another house, are camped in this hotel. It could be worse. Although she can't see, Louise is pleased I've come, and of her loss she simply says, "Ain't no use in me complainin' 'cause there ain't nothin' I can do about it anyway."

Boardwalk Odyssey

You must pass through the purgatory of the cacophony arcade with its blasting approximations of music and blinking machines that eat your tokens in exchange for noise and flashing wheels of colored lights and bulbs without the slightest idea. When you emerge into sunlight the Chinese circus is tumbling across the stage above the beach and spellbound mobs are applauding the acrobats, especially the girl in red silk who does handstands on stacks of chairs as if the cable holding her up were pure air, disbelief suspended in space and time. Boys are throwing baseballs at the same metal milk bottles as always, these games, these rides, these frightful houses haunting eternity with their recurrent hot dogs and fried childhoods, romance of adolescence, eighth-grade girls made up to look like hookers strolling in search of sex when they are, without quite knowing it, sex itself at the dawn of adult regret. Riders of the machines are screaming clamped into their seats by steel bars and you can feel the terror of your first rollercoaster, fear of flying into infinity at Ocean Park in the fifties, your sister and brother powerless to prevent your death, though you have endured and survived these long decades to relive everything several times over, even this bemusement at the parks of summer where the smells of salt and sugar and bubbling oils and lotions coat one's skin with a strange nostalgia, current pleasures complicated by consciousness, memory infecting every moment with its endless vanishings and streams of people and their foreign faces recognized as always in the intimacy of myth. Bronzed and fleeting, ancient as Greece itself, you are again anointed with olive oil and laurels as your glistening limbs smile under the strokes of imagined hands, those of the same girls who tried to seduce Odysseus. The sirens you hear are in your own mind responding to the emergency of remembering everything, just as these refugees hold their phones to photograph moments of escaping play. You and they will return from your journeys tired with tales of perils and wonders beyond your strength to describe.