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So Long: A Reflection on the Reality and Illusion of Change

I.*

On once sacred land
 Caterpillars cut quarries,
 turn (perhaps into butterflies)
 and disappear.

A land where bearded men
 rode horses crossed
 dirt roads, dusty trails,
 woven paths on a
 dead, red volcano.¹

Now, soulless machines
 strip mountains,
 bore earth
 like feral pigs,
 whizzing, clanking,
 crushing—

Men piss on the rocks.
 Man paved over the Elsinore trough;
 made the land work for him.

Once the sky
 Was a clear blue hue;
 maybe a cloud or two...
 Now it's checkerboarded
 with crisscrossed contrails
 from passenger jets.
 F-16 Fighting Falcons
 Dominate the skies.
 Blackhawk helicopters,
 V-22 Osprey tiltrotors
 break and chop up
 sound barriers
 with neo-birdcall—

(Cue Wagner's, "The Ride of the Valkyries."²

(Here's to Apocalypse Now!))³

Make the thunderbird

* Because this is a poem, not a research essay, I did not use standard MLA in text citations (e.g. (Smith 6)). For the sake of aesthetics, source material is indicated through use of footnotes.

¹ Hudson p. 24 – "In the same year of the first visit to Temecula came another party... In the party were David Jackson, for whom Jackson Hole in Wyoming is named, and John Trumbull Warner, who would become famous as owner and operator of Warner's Ranch."

² "Ride of the Valkyries"

³ Coppola

look like a mud hen!
 Fft fft fft fft fft fft!
 Smog is the new fog!
 Artifice is the new Nature!

Dead, red volcano groans⁴
 under the weight of modernity.
 Civilized man scrapes
 the face off the rock,
 rips out its granite heart,⁵
 blasts it into rubble;
 now the land is unrecognizable.
 Stagnant water in the pool
 where Tenaja Falls used to flow⁶
 when it rained soft rain
 stinks like amphibian waste.
 The frogs' dried up bodies are there
 bleached on the banded rock.
 I throw stones in the pool;
 water still moves as it should.
 A small splash produces ripples
 which radiate across the whole
 surface of the water,
 spreading out in all directions,
 ceaseless, growing more complex
 with each second—
 Hidden numbers.

 Magic!
 Some cosmic mathematician
 ascribing value, counting
 the countless variables
 present in the chaotic system.
 Earth is the pond.
 We are the rock.
 Changes in a system
 destabilize balance.
 There will be a new equilibrium—
 The dead and barren moon
 looks beautiful doesn't it?
 Santa Rosa Plateau boasts
 the finest remaining
 California bunchgrass

⁴ Birnbaum and Cato p. 7 – “The local rock type changes to volcanic rock (basalt), characterized by the dark gray to black vespicular rocks and associated red soil.”

⁵ Barnett et al. p. 24

⁶ *Cleveland National Forest: Tenaja Falls Trail*

prairie system in the Southwestern
United States⁷

(You watch the man driving the truck
with the lawnmower in its bed).

Smokey Bear says
there's gonna be a fire today;
it's gonna smoke out
all the enchanted fairies.

Back in Murrieta & Temecula,⁸
where the streets form grids
like nets for the earth,
the red tile roofs
of Santa Fe stucco houses
bake under the sun.
People walk their dogs;
let them shit on the green
grass lawns while rainbows
erupt from sprinkler heads.
City officials post notices
That say **Limit Water Use**.

The land up on that mesa,
the spot where Earth
intersects with Heaven
and the insects discuss
the folly of man
as tyrant flycatchers
snap their beaks—

I hope it stays timeless.

The men breaking the rocks
into dust have families to feed
and needs to satisfy.
Some still believe there's magic
to be found in the vernal pools
or in the quiet
of the night
when the whizzing,
clanking, crushing
sounds cease, and the
cicadas can be heard
harmonizing with
frogs, crickets, owls—
Freaks and stoners
hanging out at the creek

⁷ "Our Wildlife"

⁸ *Santa Rosa Plateau Ecological Reserve: Area History*

next to the crushed, jagged beer
 cans— rusty aluminum verses
 enclosed in stanzas of frayed and yellowed
 cigarette butts on a page
 of half-soaked mattress—
 in a poem which tells the story of their lives—
 They eat psilocybin, drip acid
 in their eyes,
 knit their memories,
 their narratives together
 joint by burning joint,
 and evaporate in the moonlight
 like the vernal pools...

So long, nature
 So long, magic
 So long, mud houses
 So long, suburbia
 So long, stories

So long.

II.

On Santa Rosa Plateau
 the sun inches across the sky
 like gold lichen across the rocks;
 but the days move
 like hummingbird wings.

Shallow streams gossip⁹
 about the snow and ice
 —whisper fictions
 about the clouds.
 They know each of their names—
 Henry. Rose. Matias.

But the streams dry up
 in March or April
 and fall silent.

 Polygonal basalt columns¹⁰
 ramble on dryly
 about the changes they've seen

⁹ Heizer and Elsasser pp. 209-210 – “Among the Pomo and many other Californian tribes, all plants, animals, and natural features (stones, springs) were believed to have thought and feeling.”

¹⁰ Armstrong

in a stony tongue
 man forgot¹¹
 when the last of the magic
 Evaporated
 with the plateau's pools
 one thirsty summer.

III.

The plateau
 Is an old woman
 With honeysuckle eyes:

 In the morning
 She sweet lizard-paints
 A symphony of mudstone textures
 And dances like a coyote.

After lunch
 She rattle bird-writes
 A watercolor of desert scents
 And sleeps like a sycamore.

 When she wakes up
 She sage spider-weaves
 A cuisine of yellow birdsong
 And prowls like a bobcat.

As the sun sets
 She smooth mouse-bakes
 A perfume of terraced vistas
 And sings like a red tailed hawk.

 When the night comes
 Honeysuckle Eyes
 Black flower-concocts
 An erotics of open space
 And eats like a mule deer.

IV.

Where the clouds, inverted, splash against bare ankles
 And submerge the whole mountain in wispy vapor

Where the dew clings like ants to red manzanita

¹¹ Heizer and Elsasser p. 210 – "A Nomlaki Indian told one ethnographer, 'Everything in this world talks, just as we are [talking] now—the trees, rocks, everything. But we cannot understand them, just as the white people do not understand Indians.'"

And the purple sun drizzles gray light on the hilltops

Where the silhouettes find themselves full of color
And the mountain lion licks water from his paw prints

Where the regal mountain quail prances in towers
Of blue lupines and laughs at the foothill yuccas

Where the arroyo willows weep on the dirt paths
And the roadrunners swim and splash in the mud

Where hummingbirds wear jewels instead of feathers
And tweet about their taste for dark chocolate lilies

The moon turns pink and sleeps in a flowerbed
While cold, glowing stars rain dreams into tired eyes

V.

The roots of the coast live oak¹²
Dig into the soils of the past—
Embed themselves in the Memories
Of the quiet earth.
They spread out horizontally
To grapple with Lava rock
And stabilize themselves
against the Wind.
They graft themselves
To the roots of other oaks
And make small talk
About the weather.
The coast live oaks Dream
about another time
When the Luiseño¹³
walked barefoot over their roots
And sang beneath their branches.

VI.

Jacob usually sleeps
under an Engelmann oak¹⁴
up on the mesa.
If he's not there,
he's dogfighting with crows
in the gully

¹² The Resources Agency p. 54 – “Oaks are also long-lived plants, with some trees living for centuries.”

¹³ *Santa Rosa Rancho*

¹⁴ *Santa Ana Mountains*

or sucking on honeysuckle
 in the middle of the bunch grass.
 Jacob doesn't talk much,
 but he has a lot to say.

I listen to his movements.
 I watch his story spread
 out through time
 like the wings
 of golden eagles.¹⁵

Jacob is probably as old as the earth.
 I think he's lived up on the mesa
 since the moon
 was a white tailed kite
 and the sun
 was a bumblebee.

VII.

This is Snake Country
 Here at the southern end
 Of the Santa Ana mountains.
 We've got coastal rosy boas,
 San Bernardino ring-necks,
 Hammond's two-striped garter,
 San Joaquin coachwhips,
 The western yellow-bellied racer,
 The San Diego gopher snake,
 The California striped racer...
 Then there's the Red Diamond,
 The Western, the Southern Pacific,
 The Sidewinder, and the Mojave
 — *All rattlesnakes.*
 Oh! And let's not forget about
 The California King snake.¹⁶

The rangers say,
 "Never step or put your hands
 where you cannot see."
 (Probably good advice
 No matter where you are)
 Exposed ankles are the snakes'
 Playthings.

¹⁵ *Cleveland National Forest: Bird List*

¹⁶ Skalsky

You shouldn't be alone
 In Snake country.
 They say it was a snake
 That tricked a lone woman
 Named Eve into eating
 The cell reception
 So, it's spotty at best
 And if you get bit
 You're gonna find
 Yourself in one hell
 of a race down
 the mountain.
 Be careful
 Out there,
 Friends.
 XOXO
 XOX
 XO
 X

VIII.

Butterflies flutter
 by Aimlessly
 over the Long Grass.
 They find Flowers by Chance.
 I heard that a lot of Species
 don't even have the Proper Organs
 To Drink Nectar,
 and that Life after the Chrysalis
 is a Race to Breed
 Before Starvation Consumes
 their Fluorescent Bodies.
 I don't know if this is true
 But I think about it—
 About how humans
 Aren't so different
 From butterflies

IX.

This shrimp, man. I'm a believer!
 The only place in the world
 you can find it
 is in the Vernal Pools
 on Santa Rosa Plateau.
 It's called the Santa Rosa fairy shrimp—
 It's got a fitting name.

The pools dry up after spring
 and all the shrimp die, right?
 But the shrimp's embryos
 (they're called cysts),
 they can lie dormant
 in the ground
 For hundreds of years,
 Waiting for the right weather—¹⁷
 The perfect season—
 To grow into adults.¹⁸
 Crazy, right?
 Now I know you know this,
 but there's been a drought in California
 for five years
 (It's gonna last 100 years
 The weatherman said),
 so the pools are empty now,
 covered in shrubs and long grasses.
 Man, you wouldn't know
 they were pools
 if there weren't signs
 all around shouting
 VERNAL POOLS ←
 But the shrimp don't care
 if it's dry like the Atacama—
 Don't care if people never
 see them again.
 When the rains come back,
 man,
 and the pools fill up,
 they'll be resurrected
 and walk on the water.

¹⁷ Sowell p. 106 – “Not just any rain will bring the fairy shrimp out of its dormancy. Cooler, near-freezing temperatures promote hatching...”

¹⁸ Ammenheuser

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