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OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF ARTS

IN

LITERATURE AND WRITING STUDIES

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home

The light morning breeze slips past, wrapping around me, and slightly lifts the tail of my shirt. The cool air brushes my skin and gives me a slight chill. I pull my shirt down, shove my hands into the pockets of my pants, and watch as dust floats by on the wind passing from the land out over the ocean.

No longer blocked by buildings or channeled between houses along the old neighborhood's winding streets, the wind picks up speed and sends ripples off toward Catalina Island and Hawaii, disappearing beneath the marine layer that hides the horizon from today’s dawn. The sunlight barely shines from over the distant mountains but is bright enough to provide a faint glow, and although it’s the beginning of what will be another warm summer day, the heat of the sun has yet to drive the morning’s chill from the air.

I walk down to the water’s edge to try and steady myself for the day ahead. The tidal flow and waves have carved a ledge into the packed wet sand. I sit, hang my legs over it, and look out across the blue water. Even though everything looks gray through the haze, I still know the water’s blue, and as the wind intertwines with the water currents and waves, I can make out silhouettes of shapes and patterns on the water’s surface. I stare out over the desolate ocean and up and down the beach. There’s no one in sight. I love living near the ocean.

A bakery truck stops and turns down Pacific Street. As the driver presses hard on the gas, the diesel engine roars. I watch the truck head toward the pier as its
exhaust settles from the torrent. I see these trucks everyday but never hear them. The noise is lost in the daytime as it blends into the polyphonic sound of commerce.

It's getting lighter, and the clamor of the truck reminds me of the inevitable. People are beginning to stir. I'm sitting too close to the main beach access. I push myself to my feet and stroll south along the water's edge. Probably a good idea to get some blood flowing anyway.

In this section of town, it's not far between the streets that lead down to the beach so people have easy access from the main road where they have to park. On the weekends in summer, it can be a long search to find a place big enough to put a towel down, and soon enough the whole beach will be filled with ladies lying in the sun and kids building sandcastles at the water's edge.

Trying to prolong the peace of this solitary morning, I walk down a few blocks and position myself between two of the streets. It's about as far from the noise of cars and people as possible. I find a dry spot in the sand and stop.

The water is now eating into the ledge of sand where I was sitting before, so I shift a bit farther back to make sure a wave riding the incoming tide doesn't roll up and soak me. Although it's summertime, the water has been cold this season and getting soaked this early doesn't sound like a good way to start my day.

As I sit down, the cool powdery sand conforms to my body. Leaning back on my hands, I look out past the breaking waves, and try to focus on what is not there. There's purity and beauty in a morning's emptiness. There's nothingness, a beauty beyond.
What I can’t see is, at times, more important than what I can. In the depths of the ocean there is nothing potable and nothing breathable. Beneath the surface and out of my sight is a different world, a world that is hostile to me, yet essential.

Did newcomers to the Southwest believe the environment here was just as hostile? Did someone living in the past have the same thoughts when they crept over the distant mountains and stood looking west over the land I nonchalantly drive my truck through every day? Did the land here once produce the same humility? Or was it like a dream to finally have the deep blues of the Pacific in sight?

Out of the corner of my eye, I barely notice a fin break the surface in the calm water just past the breaking waves. I see another, and then a group of fins all break the surface at the same time.

Bottle-nosed dolphins or porpoise frequent the area and always travel in groups. Sometimes a larger one scouts ahead of the pod, but I’ve never seen one alone. Their actions always seem so graceful, as if they’re conscious of each movement. Whether it’s summer or winter, I see them hunt and play just the same. The changes in weather and temperature seem to have little or no effect on their actions. They are in their world and have adapted perfectly, naked and at home in the elements.

They drift up the beach, circling and feeding on the anchovies trapped in the swirling rip currents. With delicate yet powerful motions and seemingly perfect hunting skills, the pod chases their prey and feeds. The smaller fins of the younger dolphins come in and take turns feeding. The larger dolphins start to rapidly circle on
the outside of the bait-ball, and the current from their motion traps the small fish. I can see them scrambling for safety, but very few escape the trap.

Dolphins, like most animals, can get nasty when they are in danger or feel threatened, and they use the group structure for protection. They act like human families. Do they look at the beach and see the same vulnerability that I see in the ocean?

A large set-wave breaks hard on the outer sandbar, and the whitewater rolls across the flat water, approaching the ledge in front of me. I get ready to move out of the way, but the water barely splashes over the embankment and recedes quickly, dissolving into the powdery sand. I look back out to sea, and the dolphins are now breaching farther outside. No longer feeding, they seem to be celebrating. The pod has separated into three or four smaller groups and is now spread over a larger area. Though separated, they swim in the same direction, and their actions now seem less calculated.

The offshore winds are picking up, and an intense gust of wind blows sand into my back, sending a chill up my spine. I pull my hands out of the sand, brush them off, and tuck them up into my armpits. I shiver, trying to shake off the sudden chill. When I look up, the dolphins have vanished.

Where would I feel at home roaming around naked? Not in town. It wouldn’t be long before I was arrested. There’s not a time or place where my naked body wouldn’t suffer. Even around the equator, it can be cool at night. I guess I’ll just have to rely on my mind rather than my body to keep me warm. Maybe too much time and
adaptation have passed for us to enjoy such simplicity.

I shake the rest of the chill off and peer south, where a lone black figure moves out from shore and through the surf. I can barely make out his paddling motions, which are blurred, hidden by the mist from the offshore wind swirling around the spray of the whitewash. The current is strong from the south, and as he drifts by, I can tell his movements are labored by the neoprene of his wetsuit. Only fisherman and surfers come to the beach this early.

I feel a bit jealous of the man all alone out in the ocean, enjoying the quiet empty waves. Not too jealous though, I’m not into it this morning. I thought about bringing my surfboard down before I left but decided against it at the last minute. My mind is elsewhere.

I used to force it and go out anyway, but now I know when not to go. I’ve learned to recognize those times when I will just sit there on my board, drifting and thinking about anything but what I’m doing. I no longer torture myself. I just give into the pull, even though I don’t always know why or what is pulling me away. I just don’t go. Someone else can have my share of the waves. There’s plenty of heads out there these days.

I follow the surfer as he makes his way through the whitewash. He paddles out past the breaking waves, sits up on his board, and shakes the water from his hair. He turns and looks in toward shore. Noticing how far up the beach he’s drifted, he begins to paddle back southward, fighting the strong longshore current.

A set of waves looms up, moving quickly toward shore. The surfer paddles
directly toward the peak of the first wave. He turns and paddles hard into the wave, but the offshore wind is too strong and pushes him over the back. I lose him briefly in the spray. As the spray subsides, he’s up on the next wave with his left foot forward and facing the wave. He drops in and turns hard off the bottom, pushing chunks of water from the rail of his board. The wave stands up and begins to break just off the tail of his board. The offshore wind holds the wave open, and he snaps his board quickly, turning it slightly sideways and slowing down just enough for the wave to pitch out over him. He’s gone, hidden behind the curtain of water.

I watch intently to see if he will make it out, knowing that inside every second seems like an hour. But my hope wanes as a long section of the wave breaking from the other direction closes into the barrel he’s hidden within.

As the whitewater begins to settle, the nose of his board sticks out of the foamy water like a tombstone bobbing up and down. His surf leash is pulled tight, and he must be getting rolled around under water in the turbulence. His head pops out of the water, and he draws in a frantic breath of air. He grabs his leash, pulls his board back, and pushes the board underneath him just in time to duck-dive under the next wave. The power of the wave’s motion drags him closer to shore as he steadies himself and begins to paddle back toward the breaking waves.

Behind me, the sun has risen well above the mountains and is now beginning to break through the morning haze. Off in the distance where the horizon meets the edge of the ocean, the different shades of blue and gray are becoming more defined in the brightening light. The clouds are thin and will burn off soon. Dawn is over; the
day has arrived. No great discoveries this morning, but it’s always nice to get some thinking done.

Still searching across the horizon, I stand up. I turn to head back and am abruptly stopped by a split-second of confusion. Briefly forgetting where I am, I stare, shocked by all the condos lining the waterfront. Although the tall buildings poised along the edge of the sand block my view, the space between each complex leaves enough room to follow the long rows up the hill gradually giving way to a roof-top horizon.

The sun burns a fiery crimson, and the sides of the buildings glow with luminescent shades of carmine and orange, with a dim glow wrapping around the fronts. The colors radiate through the dissipating clouds and surreal hues of red and orange bleed from the eastward horizon into the sky. Too bad most people are still asleep. It might do them some good to see the birth of a day.

I pick up my sandals and head back to the house, dodging the places where the water rolls over the ledge and creates temporary pools of water. The tide has eaten away most of my footprints, creating a fresh canvas for others. Where the whitewash has rolled up, the sand is damp and smooth, but my prints still remain in the soft powdery sand between. Just ahead an elderly woman strolls toward me with her little white poodle. The dog lets out a labored yip. I look up and smile.

“Mornin’,” she says and smiles back.

We pass closely because the tide is full and has left only a narrow path. Small waves are reforming close to shore, rolling up the beach, and crashing on the rocks in
front of the lifeguard tower. At last night’s high tide line, there’s something colorful caught in a clump of seaweed. I bend over and untangle a bunch of popped balloons, leaving the seaweed behind. I climb up the rocks instead of waiting for the water to recede and follow the short sandy access road behind the breakwater. I stop at the trashcan under the lifeguard tower and toss in the balloons.

WARNING!
RUNOFF/STORMDRAIN WATER MAY CAUSE ILLNESS AVOID CONTACT WITH RUNOFF AND AREA OF DISCHARGE ESPECIALLY FOR 72 HOURS FOLLOWING RAINFALL

¡AVISO!
CORRIENTE DE AQUA/AQUA DEL DRENAJE DE TORMENTA PUEDE CAUSAR ENFERMEDADES EVITE CONTACTO CON AQUA DE DESAGUE Y EL AREA DONDE DESEMBOCA ESPECIALMENTE DURANTE LAS SIGUIENTES 72 HORAS DESPUES DE LA LLUVIA

COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO DEPT. OF ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CALL (619) 338-2222

WELCOME TO THE OCEANSIDE BEACHES. PLEASE, OBEY THE FOLLOWING REGULATIONS:

NO
ALCOHOL
DOGS
GLASS
FIRES OUTSIDE FIRE RINGS
VEHICLES ON BEACH
I walk up the exit ramp from The Strand, a road that provides access to the residences built along the beach just past the high-tide line. There’s still not much going on aside from a few cars passing by and a couple surfers changing into their wetsuits. I stop and wait for a car to pass through the intersection.

“You heading out?” asks one of the surfers who I recognize.

“Nah, not today,” I answer. “Looks fun though.”

“Is it bowling up where it was yesterday?” she asks.

“Yeah, kinda. I think the peak shifted a bit to the south, and the current looks way stronger.”

Off to my left a woman is asleep, stretched out on one of the benches that line the sidewalk. Lying on the ground next to her is a brown paper bag. The screw top rim of a large bottle is sticking out. The bag is twisted and worn around the neck of the bottle, and there’s a small damp spot on the cement where some of the contents have spilled.

I often see her around town, and I wonder how tight she was holding the bottle and what time it was when she passed out.

“See ya,” the surfer says, as the two run by.

“Have fun,” I say.

Back out over the ocean, the natural palette of blues is interrupted only by a flock of gulls and a boat passing along the horizon. I cross the street and head up the hill into the day. I wish I could always look out to sea.
time to go

Bleeding orange and red hues are beginning to surrender to a pale-blue sky. As I walk up the hill on my way home, the rays breach the rooftops and shine intensely, a penetrating brightness that hides detail from my sensitive light eyes.

The breeze is blocked by the long rows of houses that blanket the hillside, and it’s getting warmer. I pause for a moment in a shadow cast by a tall Canary Island pine. The only trees lining the street are those meticulously planted in perfect rows sometime during the neighborhood’s initial development. A few equally tall eucalyptus and some scraggily carob trees break the long line of prominent pines. The pines with their reddish brown bark and bushy tops reach over a hundred feet in the air. None of the really tall trees are native to the area, but scattered amongst them are some coastal scrub oak. And although their roots are trapped between the sidewalk and street, and their seeds have only the narrow strip of ground on which to fall and grow, they possess a strange beauty.

I pull my long-sleeve shirt over my head and throw it over my shoulder. Wishing I had my sunglasses, I step from the shade of the tree and squint in the beaming sun.

On the opposite side of the street, a young boy and girl, each dressed in blue shorts and white polo shirts, pass along the sidewalk. They are a few paces ahead of an older woman who labors behind a stroller. Guarded by a short chain-link fence and safe from a bite, the kids taunt two howling beagles as they pass by a small, enclosed
front yard. The little beagles follow the kids howling louder and louder, becoming more agitated as the kids laugh, pick up sticks, and drag them along the fence. The woman says nothing.

I take the first step up to the house but stop to look for the morning paper. I search through the bushes and in the long bed of night blooming jasmine that lines the street in front of the neighbor’s house. No paper. I squat down and peer under my roommate’s car parked in the driveway. The paper is directly in the center. I kneel down and stretch my arm out to grab the bag, but it’s just past my fingertips. Lying down on my chest, I pull myself slightly under the car, pinch the edge of the bag, and pull it toward me. As I pick up the paper and my shirt now lying on the cement next to me, dead grass from the neglected front lawn falls from my clothes.

Inside the house, it’s still cold. The windows in the front room face west and don’t gather the warmth of the sun until it rises over the house. And since the blinds are still drawn, the chill of night lingers, hovering over the hardwood floors. I’m slightly sweaty from the walk, so I set the paper on the couch and put my shirt back on.

After twisting the blinds open, I pull the long cord to raise them. Light shines in and illuminates the old off-white, lead-based paint that’s gradually chipping away from the edges of the small windowpanes. All the windows have nails hammered into the tracks to keep them from opening more than about six inches. As I pull the three windows open, the top of each hits the protruding nails, dropping paint chips onto the windowsill.
The sun has warmed the ground outside and now draws in the cool air floating over the cold ocean, creating a warm, steady on-shore breeze, which drifts through the small openings and begins to fight the chill from the air. I untie the plastic bag, dump the paper onto the coffee table, and as I head for the kitchen, I hit the power button on the TV.

I stuff the bag into a drawer already overflowing with plastic bags awaiting return to the store. I pick up the coffeepot and pour yesterday’s coffee down the drain, adding to the stains of the old, once-white ceramic sink.

From the kitchen, the monotone voice of a newscaster detailing the end of the day’s weather report echoes through the house.

“...and in the inland valleys, look for temperatures to reach into the high nineties...”

The piercing sound of the coffee grinder drowns out the news. Out the kitchen window not five feet away, the morning sun illuminates the side of the barn-red house next door. As the first rays swim over our rooftop, the reflected light absorbs the color of the house and emits a faint, yet lurid glow that fills the kitchen.

“...the death toll has reached almost two-hundred and is expected to climb...”

I press the button to brew the coffee and quickly return to see what’s happening on TV.

“...according to Balinese officials, 171 people have been confirmed killed...”

The charred remains of a large building and the skeletons of smoldering cars flood the screen.
“...and a total of 274 were injured.”

The screen flashes to three newscasters sitting behind a desk.

“The blasts come on the second anniversary of the al-Qaeda linked attack against the USS Cole. Although there has been no claim of responsibility, many suspect al-Qaeda involvement. Officials say the Sari Club at the Kuta Beach resort...”

Oh fuck...

“...was targeted because it was a popular night spot for Australians and other tourists.”

The Sari Club. Kuta Beach. I’ve been there.

Why? It was a fucking nightclub. What do they gain? I can’t picture a group of people sitting at a bar as a major threat to anyone.

I walk out on the front deck and take a deep breath. The morning air smells fresh and through the open windows, I can faintly hear the frantic intonation of a man speaking with a strong Balinese accent.

The sea of rooftops extends out in all directions, only interrupted by the trees that have grown above the Spanish tiled and shingled houses and the distant row of palm trees lining the road along the beach.

“...Bali has always been safe. Tourism is important to us. We won’t stand for this. Our name has been smeared...”

I picture myself sitting at the Sari Club bar. It was four or five years ago. I remember having drinks with people I didn’t know. I remember feeling so relaxed,
not a care in the world. All that mattered was that moment, talking story about the perfect crystal-clear waves, the beautiful Balinese country, and the peacefulness and genuine humility of the Hindu people.

What if someone I know is there... Why Bali? Who’s on vacation? Where are they? Is Bali part of their trip? I hope they’re on a boat somewhere far from Kuta. And what about the surfers and travelers I’ve lost contact with?

The large aloe plant on the deck is getting ready to bloom earlier than usual. A hummingbird with a dark plum-colored head, light colored chest, and metallic green back zips between the closed pinkish orange flowers of the aloe spike and the open white flowers of the lemon tree. The bird doesn’t land. He hovers, darting back and forth. I wonder if he will migrate in the winter. Some hummingbirds journey to Central and South America, but I see these ones around here all year.

I feel the sparse stubble on my face and an overwhelming need to wash the night’s sleeplessness from my hair. I take a deep breath, drop my hands, and walk back in the house.

“...more on this developing story after the break.”

Captain Crunch appears, jumping around on the screen, and I go to refill my coffee.

I sip the hot coffee, push the magazines and bills out of the way, and set the cup on the coffee table next to the morning paper. I pick up the front-page section, lean back on the Mexican blanket covering one side of the L-shaped couch that no longer remembers its true color and notice the red light on the answering machine is
Who would be calling so early?

The door to the adjoining hallway is slightly cracked. I pull it closed and playback the message.

“Hey Sammy, this is Mike. The waves are firing. Where are ya? I’m headin’ to the base for an early. Gimme a call soon or I’ll just see you out there.”

beep

“Uh... Sam...hey...this is Rick. When ya get this message, will ya gimmie a call back at the restaurant?”

Great. What does that asshole want?

“...still no one has claimed responsibility for the attack on the small island known for the hospitality of its people...”

I pick up the phone, dial and stare into the vacant, nonfunctional fireplace designed exclusively for Southern California winters.

“...she was killed on her 38th birthday...”

President Bush appears on the screen.

“These people who have no soul, no conscience...”

The secretary Vicky answers the phone and tells me Rick is out and will call me when he returns.

I set the phone on the table and scan the headlines.

Military Families Brace for Possible War

“...President Bush said he believes it will be linked to the al-Qaeda and
defunct Taliban regime...

Reactors Vessel Removed from San Onofre Plant

What?

The vessel that held the radioactive core from the first nuclear reactor at San Onofre was lifted from its quarters on Saturday >>>REACTOR, A-4

I flip and read on.

...An Edison spokesman aide said radiation emitted was nil or well below accepted safety standards...

Whatever that means.

...Despite guarantees of safety, anti-nuclear activists said the site will remain hazardous for hundreds of years.

San Onofre is located about 15 miles north of Oceanside and is said to provide power to people in countries as far away as the southern regions of South America.

“...before we go to break, here is a look at this morning’s opening bell on Wall Street.”

The market’s opening bell rings, and the constantly scrolling numbers of the stock board appear on the screen. The news fades out, and two guys lifting weights flash on the screen. One is bench pressing. The one spotting says, “You’ve got to use anything and everything that gives you an advantage over the competition...”

And that’s what we are supposed to strive to achieve? Anything and everything. I don’t know about that. No one should feel like they have to always be one up on the Joneses.
The screen changes again. “This week on Nature Attacks…” I hit the button, and the screen goes blank.

I finish my coffee and go to refill my cup. Next door, my neighbor is bent over his lawnmower, tinkering with something on its side. He gets up and pulls hard on the starter cord. The motor coughs but sputters out. He reaches back down to the motor, fiddles with something on the other side. He pulls vigorously on the cord again, and as the engine comes to life, a black cloud of smoke billows from the exhaust, and the deafening sound blares through the window trailed by the smell of a burning two-stroke fuel.

Does he realize how early in the morning it is? Why can’t he wait another hour or so to start? I move all the plants from the windowsill and slam the window shut. The sound of the engine still comes through, but the old, thick glass panes muffle most of the noise.

I fill my cup and return to the day’s headlines.

Federal, State Officials Mulling Water-Transfer

With a Dec. 31 deadline looming, negotiations deadlocked and California’s water supply hanging in the balance, state and federal officials are mulling over ways to complete a water transfer that is the cornerstone of a plan to cut over-reliance on Colorado River water.

Interesting? We have enough intellect and money to bring water to a water-starved Mediterranean climate, but we neglect to think about how many people the supply can sustain and for how long. The United States Bureau of Reclamation built
the eighty-two mile All-American Canal in the 1930s and began transferring water to Imperial Valley in 1940. Now a predictable, yet mild drought has catalyzed a bidding war. Who will win? Who has rights to free flowing water anyway? Where’s the logic? It must be hiding somewhere in the well-irrigated beauty of Los Angeles and San Diego.

Officials say they will have to intervene if the San Diego County Water Authority...

Water Authority. What a fascinating concept.

...and the Imperial Irrigation District can’t complete the deal, because it is so important.

Yes. Big news. Of course it’s important. The Imperial Irrigation District competes with Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, Wyoming, Arizona, Nevada, California, and Mexico for water rights.

But what’s important to them is a better question. The water? The money? The river? The political position? The people who drink the water? The people who spray it on their deep green lawns?

I hear the toilet flush, and the hallway door opens.

“What up Randal?”

“Nothin’ man. What’s going on?”

“I made coffee.”

“So I heard,” he says and walks to the kitchen, rubbing his eyes.

“How was work last night,” I ask.

“Awright man. Slow for a Sunday.”
“Make any scoots?”

“Not really, ’bout 80 bucks. No early birds. We got a late start. What’d end up doin’?” he asks.

“Just chilled, ya know. I gotta lot on my mind lately.”

“Hey that reminds me, I heard you put in your two weeks,” he says. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Sorry man. But I just can’t take that place anymore.”

“I’m hearin’ ya.”

“It used to be fun. What happened?” I ask.

“Fuckin’ corporate mentality.”

“No shit. What’s up with those assholes? They ruined it.”

“Can’t run a restaurant on numbers alone,” he says.

“But from Chicago for that matter,” we laugh, and he goes back to his room.

I can’t believe it’s been three years. I remember seeing my brother’s face when I got off the plane in L.A. We were so stoked to see each other, but wasted no time on small talk and catching up so we could get out of the airport as fast as we could. That place is a true nightmare. After the drive south, he took me straight to his work for a cold beer. It seemed like it had been forever since I sat at a bar in the U.S.

That’s where it all started. Fred asked his boss if they were hiring, and he said, “yes,” but the only position he had open was washing dishes on Friday and Saturday night. I’ll never forget my next words. “No worries.” Shit, I hadn’t worked in ten months. Was I gonna say no? And for awhile, everyone was so cool. They didn’t care
that I was back wading in the filth, floating in the dish pond and scrubbing the grime off all the plates. And sometimes a server would hand me a Jack and Coke, which always made the night go by faster. But even now that I’m bartending and making great money, I just can’t get past the newly adopted bottom-line mentality. I feel like I can’t do anything right and that someone is always watching over my shoulder.

“Dude, did you go somewhere this morning? I could’ve sworn I heard someone leave super early,” Randy asks, as he walks by heading for more coffee.

“Yeah man, down to the beach.”

“You’re crazy. It wasn’t even light out.”

The phone rings, and I pick it up.

“Hello?”

“Is Sam there?”

“This is Sam. What’s up, Rick?”

“Chris told me you put in your two weeks on Friday.”

“Yeah.”

“Well...don’t worry about your shifts. I got ’em covered.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve had a real bad attitude lately, and I don’t want your short-time negativity rubbing off on anyone else.”

“But I was kinda counting on the money from my shifts.”

“There not your shifts, Sam. They’re Chart House shifts, and it ain’t gonna happen. We were gonna let you go anyway.”
“Whatever man. That’s bullshit.”

“No. We’ve been getting a ton of complaints from employees and customers.”

“From who?”

“Can’t tell you. I’m sure you know who.”

“What have they been saying?”

“Same as always. That you’re short and not helpful. And last week a guy at the bar said you were downright rude to him.”

“You know that’s total bullshit.”

“No Sam. We’ve got documentation.”

“Whatever.”

click

“What a dick,” Randy says.

“No shit. I needed those shifts.”

“You awright?”

“Yeah fuggit. I’ve been thinking of getting outta here for awhile anyway.”

“Where?”

“Don’t know yet.”

“Just let me know,” he says and walks out on the deck for a smoke.

I pick up the paper and start to read. Words don’t sink in. I stop, toss it back in the pile on the table, and push it away.

Damn, it feels great to be done with that place, but what about work? I won’t last long around here without any income, and I’m not going to leave the boys
hanging with the rent. Maybe it’s time to use my degree. It’s been six years. I should’ve done something with it a long time ago, but what was I going to do with a degree in Ecology and Environmental Studies at 21? I certainly didn’t want to teach. Shit, I was just a kid myself. Who would have listened? I don’t want to waste all the time and energy I spent, and I’m tired of working just to barely make ends meet. Hell, I’m tired of this whole scene. Maybe I should check into going back to school. It’s about time to start using my mind instead of my back, but it’s just so easy having no responsibilities, nothing and no one but me to worry about. I can always get another dead-end job, and I know there’s nothing wrong with passing idly through life. Then why does it bother me? These jobs always starts getting under my skin. It’s a gut feeling, like it’s just not the right thing for me. I know I don’t have to, but do I want to start contributing more? Or am I just going to squeak by until I’m too tired to care? I’ve gotta get out of here.

“Hey Randy, I’m gonna bail as soon as possible,” I say as I walk outside to join him.

“Where you going?”

“Remember that spot in the mountains we found?”

“I’ll never forget it,” he smiles, takes a long drag off his smoke, and flicks it into the yard.

“You should come with me.”

“Can’t…gotta work tonight.”

“Meet me out there then. I’ll be there for a few days, maybe longer.”
“Yeah?”

“Definitely.”

“Awright man, I’ll try.”

“I’m gonna start gettin’ ready.”

“Cool,” he pauses and turns toward me. “Hey Sam.”

“What?” I ask and look directly at him, shading my face from the sun.

“Don’t worry. Ok?”

“Ok man.”

It’s been some time since I last traveled, and my gear is spread throughout the house. I find my cooking stove and half-full fuel canister wrapped tightly in a plastic bag on one of the shelves along the wall in the garage. My tent and pack are way in the back of the storage cabinets set in the wall above the main part of the closet in my room. I pull them down and quickly stuff all the clothing items I think I’ll need in the bottom of my pack, making sure to bring some warm clothes for the cool mountain nights. Even though it’s summer, and the mountains in San Diego are not very high, the elevation can still make a difference at night, and this time of year I doubt I’m allowed to have a fire.

In one of the pockets of my pack, there are matches, a compass, and a small first aid kit, which includes a snakebite kit. I pull my sleeping bag down from the other side of the cabinet and notice my camera sitting on a shelf in the closet. I pick it up and open the top of my bag, but I pause and put the camera back on the shelf. It’s not that kind of trip. My Swiss Army knife and a larger Gerber blade are in one of the
side pockets, and a crumpled, cheap green poncho is stuffed in the other. Not much rain in San Diego, especially this time of year, but I leave it just in case.

I spread everything out on the floor in the empty dining room between the TV room and the kitchen, adding a couple pens and a blank notebook to the pile.

“Damn man. That’s a lot of shit,” Randy says, laughing at the mess on the floor. “When are you leavin’?”

“As soon as possible.”

“Hey...I’m headin’ to the store for stuff for breakfast,” he says and picks up his keys off the coffee table. “You need anything?”

“Yeah...but I’ll be gone by the time you get back. Oh...hey...don’t forget to let Robin know where I went.”

“Ok, no problem.”

“Thanks man. Maybe I’ll see ya out there?”

“I’ll try,” he says, pushing the screen door open to leave. “Be safe.”

“See ya,” I say and head for the shower.

Steam fills the air in the tiny windowless add-on bathroom, and as I wipe the condensation from the mirror, dark circles under my eyes glare back. When I turn to leave the bathroom, the blurred reflection of red, orange and black reflects in the mirror. Sometimes I forget about the reminder that I have inscribed on my back. The two dolphins make a circle around a surfer standing with his board, and the sun background is positioned above a black tribal design that balances the flames around the sun.
I remember sitting in the old rusty chair in my bunkhouse in Cordova, Alaska, as Ryan worked his painful magic with his homemade tattoo gun and India ink. I never wanted to forget those times in my life. Even though I hated working fifteen to eighteen hours days at the Silver Lining Processing plant, at least I knew what I had to do each morning when I woke up. And it was all to fund my travels. Five months work for ten months off wasn’t a bad trade. It was so simple. When I ran out of money, I stopped and found a job or went where I knew there would be work. I wasn’t in one place for long enough to get attached to anyone or anything. Simplicity was bliss or so I thought. I just don’t know anymore. Maybe it’s time to do something more.

I slide into my flip-flops and toss the shoes I was wearing on the pile. How did I get all of this crap? For so long, all I had was my backpack, surfboards, and a guitar. My guitar is leaning on the chair by the couch; I stare at it for a moment and leave it where it sits. When did I acquire so much extra baggage?

After I finish transferring the pile to my white Toyota pick-up truck, I grab my sunglasses, bankcard, and ID from the bookshelf next to the phone and take a quick last look around. I dump the last contents of my water bottle into the plant sitting on top of the entertainment center and refill it from the self-filtering water pitcher in the refrigerator.

I open the front door and pause briefly. What did I forget? Just as I get halfway down the stairs, the phone rings. I run back up, fight with my keys and the lock, and dash to pick up the phone.
“Hello?”

“May I please speak to Mrs. Randy Thompson?”

“Who’s calling?”

“This is Christy with Fleet Visa; this is just a courtesy call. Is this Mr. Thompson?”

“Do you know what time it is?” I ask.

Silence.

“...Uh... I don’t understand. Is there a better time for me to call back?”

“How ‘bout never,” I bark and slam down the phone.

Courtesy call.

I close the camper shell on the back on my truck, climb in, and turn the key.

The radio comes to life.

“...authorities have concluded that the purchase of tons of sand from Mexico and shipped to the Hawaiian islands was against coastal regulations and could be detrimental to the fragile ecosystem along the coast in the Ensenada...”

I quickly hit a different preset station.

“...takes 3-1 series lead to move tantalizingly close to its first World Series. The Angels managed only two singles off Minnesota ace Brad Radke in the first six innings when Erstad opened the seventh, reaching for a low-and-away changeup and blooped a hit to shallow...”

I push in the tape sticking out of the deck.

“...showed me eeeveryyyboooody naked and disfigured nothing shocking...”
Tribal drums and hard-distorted guitar emanate from the speakers, as Jane’s Addiction tears through the silence.

I pull away from the curb, heading for the bank. I drive through the impersonally efficient ATM, make a withdrawal, and pull into traffic, northbound on Pacific Coast Highway.
the road

The summer heat is coming fast. While waiting for the light to turn green, the breeze from over the ocean cools my face. The tops of the palm trees sway as the breeze is channeled rapidly up the east west streets of the neighborhood. The onshore breeze is picking up, and when it blows each road becomes a giant breezeway moving the cool ocean air eastward up the hill before the heat reflecting off the black pavement has a chance to steal all the air’s moisture.

There’s less than a quarter-tank of gas in my truck, so when the light finally turns green, I pull into the corner station to fill up before heading inland.

MTBE
THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA HAS DETERMINED THAT THE USE OF THIS CHEMICAL PRESENTS A SIGNIFICANT RISK TO THE ENVIRONMENT.

At the end of my ten-dollar bill, the pump shuts off. I wait the three seconds, push in the drip prevention device, pull the nozzle out, and watch as the leftover fuel drips down the side of my truck and onto the ground.

WARNING
CHEMICALS KNOWN TO THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA TO CAUSE CANCER, BIRTH DEFECTS OR OTHER REPRODUCTIVE HARM ARE FOUND IN GASOLINE, CRUDE OIL AND MANY OTHER PETROLEUM PRODUCTS AND THEIR VAPORS, OR RESULT FROM THEIR USE. READ AND FOLLOW LABEL DIRECTIONS AND USE CARE WHEN HANDLING OR USING ALL PETROLEUM PRODUCTS.

“Say man...can ya help me out?” a man asks, walking toward me.
"What up?" I reply.

"Awe shit man, ya got any spare change. I just ran outta gas 'round the corner."

"Hang on a sec." I say, reaching into my ashtray. I pull out a bit of change. 

"Here ya go." I add to the pile he already has in his hand.

"Thanks bro," he murmurs.

"No worries."

"Cool," he says and walks straight up to the lady next to me and asks her for the same favor.

I hop in my truck and crank the stereo back up.

"...there's so much space I cut me a piece with some fine wine...it brought peace to my mind in the summertime..."

While I'm waiting for an opening in traffic to pull out of the gas station, I see the man in his matching green jump suit with the white racing stripe down the side ask two other people for change. Does he really need help? Or is he going to the corner store to pick up a bottle and get gassed?

I pull back onto Coast Highway and continue north for a mile or so before turning east on Mission Avenue. As I pass over interstate 5, I watch the shimmering blues of the Pacific disappear from my rearview mirror. I've always lived near the ocean and leaving it, no matter which direction I'm driving, always feels awry. It never feels right. Something is missing without the flat blue horizon and the smell of salt water in the air.
The wild winds weep,
And the night is a-cold;
Come hither, Sleep,
And my griefs infold:

But lo! the morning peeps
Over the eastern steeps,
And the rustling birds of dawn
The earth do scorn.

Lo! to the vault
Of paved heaven,
With sorrow fraught
My notes are driven:
They strike the ear of night,
Make weep the eyes of day;
They make mad the roaring winds,
And with tempests play.

Like a fiend in a cloud
With howling woe,
After night I do cloud,
And with night will go;
I turn my back to the east,
From whence comforts have increas’d;
For light doth seize my brain
With frantic pain.

—William Blake, Mad Song
hydrogen oxide

Second to oxygen, water is the most important resource for humans and for most plants and other animals as well. If a human doesn’t eat, he or she can survive for up to 30 to 40 days. But if a human has no water, death can visit in as little as a few hours to a few days, depending on the conditions. Water is essential but so common that its importance is often forgotten.

So why is California, especially Southern California, such a desirable place to live? Relative to the population, there is no water. Take a look at any map of the United States; there is water all across the East Coast, into the Great Lakes and to the middle of the country, but from there on, water is scarce at best. But even in the naturally water-deprived California, water is so common that people tend to forget that it is essential for life. Earth is nearly three-quarters water, so in essence, the Earth should be called Water.
In addition to its prevalence, water’s unique characteristics make life on the planet possible. Its low freezing point and high boiling point, 32°F and 212°F respectively, give the molecule its needed range in liquid form, and its unique molecular structure allows for clustering properties, which can easily be easily demonstrated by placing one end of a paper towel in a glass of water and letting the other hang over the side. As I witnessed in my elementary school science class, the water climbs the towel and drips out. This occurs because one oxygen atom can bond with two hydrogen atoms, thus H2O. But the oxygen atom can add two additional hydrogen atoms from a neighboring water molecule. This creates a covalent bond or the strong bond that causes water on a flat surface to bead up into puddles rather than spread out. The bond is strong but not too strong and allows water to remain a liquid in such a large temperature range and be a universal solvent. Without this characteristic, water would lose its integrity, large bodies of water would not be stable, and living things would not hold their form.

In short, life revolves around water. So when there is no water, what happens? In *Cadillac Desert*, Marc Reisner says, “In the West, lack of water is the central fact of existence, and a whole culture and set of values have grown up around it” (12). What’s ironic is in California there is more water than anyone could ever drink, but none is potable. The Pacific Ocean, in all its grandeur, is not a resource for human consumption without the involved process of desalination, which is only in the beginning stages of being financially sound. The great blue expanse ebbs and flows with no concern for human needs. An inorganic being with such power.
Nevertheless, California’s climate, people, and ecosystems depend on the Pacific. “California’s coastal upwelling system is well known, including its variability with respect to intensity or degree of vertical advection with time [...] The cool upwelled surface waters in turn cool and stabilize onshore airflow, which creates a cool summer climate along the coast” (Botkin, et al. qtd in Knox 126). This cycle is part of what makes the coastal climate cool in the summer and warm in the winter. It creates an equable climate that is perfectly suited for human habitation, meaning that in order to live comfortably all year, humans need very little outside resources, such as air conditioning and heat or warm winter clothing. A naturally suitable environment.

So the Pacific not only controls the water it holds but also the water floating in the air, which in turn regulates the warm coastal climate and creates summers that never get too hot and the winters that never get too cold. In California’s Many Climates, Ernest Felton explains this further. He says, “Saturated air moving over colder water surfaces off the Pacific Coast is cooled until the moisture condenses into fog or low-lying stratus clouds. Strong westerly winds then sweep this fog of low stratus inland [...] As a result of the steady onshore winds from the Pacific, extremes of heat or cold seldom visit the area” (30).

Although Earth, in general, is “highly suitable” for life, California’s climate is celebrated, especially along the coast, which after the Gold Rush in the nineteenth century has become the main draw to tourists and new residents or transplants as they are commonly called.
A significant percentage of these people has come to California in order to enjoy the benefits of the celebrated climate. It comes as a surprise, therefore, to many newcomers to learn that within the State are to be found a variety of climates, ranging from one extreme to the other. Temperatures have ranged from as low as -45° to as high as 134°. Annual precipitation at one measuring station has exceeded 161 inches, while other points have gone for more than a year without any measurable rain. (Elford 1)

Two such areas of extreme nature include: the desert region of Death Valley, which is extremely dry and sits in the middle of the Mojave Desert just a couple hundred feet above sea level; and the snow covered peaks of Mt. Whitney that reach to almost 15,000 feet. But not many humans if any at all inhabit these regions. For the most part, tourists visit, snap some photos, leave, and then have a story to tell.

On many days in summer and winter here in Northern San Diego County, a sharp, yet milder contrast exists between two opposing climates. In the summer and winter the effect is opposite. On certain days when the conditions are right, anyone can hop in their car and drive east. At some point along the road, this person will pass through a wall. The wall isn’t always seen but can be felt. The air will change from cool and damp to hot and dry in the summer and warm and moist to cold and dry in the winter. Sometimes the change is so abrupt, I’ve stopped, gotten out of the car, and walked back and forth between the two.

The phenomenon is caused by climate, mainly temperature, and the area
where the temperature changes is the battleground between the opposing effects of the desert and the ocean. The ocean water cools the air and provides the moisture and fog. The desert retaliates with hot dry air. And the area where they interact shifts depending on the temperature of the desert and of the ocean. If the ocean is extremely cold in the summer, which is common and can happen quickly if the California Current decides to move closer to shore, it creates a dense fog that holds the desert air back, creating a marine layer or what many refer to as June Gloom. Water molecules float in the air and use their bond to create a fog bank. If the ocean is warmer, which in the Pacific means the upper 60s to low 70s, the desert wins and pushes the area of interaction west sometimes pushing the marine layer past the horizon line. The temperatures also cause the winds to blow, and the direction of the wind depends on which climate is winning the battle. Santa Ana conditions, strong and arid winds from the desert, occur when the desert is extremely hot and the ocean is cold. And the summer onshore flow, which is more typical, happens when the coast and the desert are closer in temperature.

The opposing climates of Southern California regulate temperature and create the equable climate along the coast. “Sea fogs and the low stratus cloud layers associated with them constitute the most striking characteristic of the California coastal climate. With very few exceptions, they are of daily occurrence during the summer in this area” (Sauer and Leighly 291). The battle between water and its absence blesses the state, creating an optimum environment for human habitation.

This phenomenon is especially apparent in the early summer mornings before
the sun has a chance to warm the air and ground. “Heat is added to the air as it moves inland during these summer months, and the fog quickly lifts to form a deck of low clouds that extend inland only a short distance before evaporating completely” (Elford 3). Nighttime then cools the air and land, and the lower temperature allows the fog to roll in, which also reduces the winds allowing the fog to remain stationary and become denser:

The coastal region of Southern California is both a winter and a summer resort. People from the cold, snow-bound East and Middle West flock to Southern California during the winter months. In summer, people from the hot regions of California and many other states stream to the relatively cool coastal belt for relief from the summer heat. You will note that the heaviest concentrations of population in California are in the coastal regions, which enjoy relatively warm winters and cool summers. In this region comfortable living may be enjoyed throughout the year. (Felton 21)

The entire state experiences this phenomenon, but in the North, the climates are much more extreme and are also separated by up to 15,000-foot-mountain-peaks. The temperatures tend to be colder, the fogs are thicker and occur more often, and the change, although more extreme, is less abrupt.

So we can add up all these factors about water and the San Diego climate and, for many scientists and for the average person, we find the perfect place to live. Consistent weather patterns. Consistent temperature. Few rainy days. No hurricanes
or earthquakes. A beautiful blue ocean. A short drive to snow-capped mountains. And the long strip of land situated between the Anza Borrego Desert and the Pacific Ocean, especially the coastal region, is regulated by the interaction between the two. Why wouldn’t this create dense population? It’s a magnet for easy living. What could be better? If you’re too hot, go down to the beach and cool off. If you’re too cold or the marine-layer decides to stick around, go out to the desert, dry off, warm up, and work on your tan. Nothing is too far. Only a short drive east or west with freeways to get you there in no time.
The coolness from the ocean is losing its battle with the heat reflecting off the roadway. The moist onshore breeze is gone, and my only relief from the heat blazing through the windshield is the air rushing in as I speed down Mission. The sound is deafening but moves air across my chest and back, evaporating my sweat and producing a cool sensation. It’s as if my body is losing the same battle as the ocean breeze.

The stoplight up ahead turns red.

“...you’re livin’ on your knees...forget the rule...oh idiot’s rule...”

The music cuts though as the sound of the wind fades. In the car next to me, a woman in her seventies has her eyes glued on me. I smile and turn down the music slightly, leaving it loud enough so she can still hear. She rolls her window up. The light changes. We part.

Through the next few lights, I notice that just about everyone sitting in traffic has their windows up. They must all be using air conditioning. Even if my truck had air conditioning, I wouldn’t use it. Not today. There’s something about moving through the environment on a trip, and air conditioning takes away a part of the experience. People sit in their cars chatting away on cell phones and eating breakfast, but they are separate from the outside world. They don’t observe. They leave their homes, which are kept at a constant 68 degrees, walk to their car where the air conditioning remains on high from the day before, and then walk into work, which is
also regulated at a constant 68 degrees. The cool temperatures help productivity you know.

What happened to the human ability to adapt and experience the world? That’s a thing of the past. Now we modify the environment even though it’s not necessary. Can’t be uncomfortable. But the body adapts. We produce sweat, and as the water in the sweat evaporates, it naturally cools the body. Why is this considered Neanderthal? Why is sweating considered a problem? It seems, instead, we should reconsider wearing suits and ties, which have no practical purpose. In hot climates, dress in clothes that keep the body cool. In cold climates, dress warm. When it’s blazing hot in Indonesia, which is the norm, people wear light airy fabrics that are loose fitting, and they constantly deal with harsher conditions than in San Diego. It’s simple logic. But then again people wouldn’t look as good as they do now with a multi-colored-silk noose decorating their attire.

This area of Oceanside is a business district, a blue-collar area. So, the people wearing the ties and thick fabrics are driving elsewhere or heading west to catch the freeway and commute downtown. A long string of stoplights leads through various buildings lining both sides of the street like steadfast soldiers. People are milling around in all directions. A few kids are wandering down the sidewalk in the direction of the school, and others seem focused on getting nowhere fast. Traffic is backing up. It’s time to punch the clock.

The cars creating the traffic are filtering in and out of the McDonald’s parking lot. The restaurant is an old style McDonald's like the ones in the commercials. It
must have been built before most of the development because the drive-thru doesn’t fit with the roads and confuses drivers on both the main road and a side street, where they are all trying to enter the small parking lot at the same time.

Once I’m through the last stretch of the business district, I can still feel a trace of moisture in the air from the ocean, but as I get to the top of the hill and begin heading down into the valley, no hint of moisture is left. I’ve just passed through the wall, and now all I feel is dry wind on my face as I’m pulled downhill into the industrial region of the valley. The sharp contrast in the air jars me for a moment. It’s as if I’m leaving home. Something is missing.

The hills on each side of the road are covered in bright yellow mustard blooms, extending miles out toward the mountains. The mustard is a meandering river of flowers that follows the roadside anchoring their seeds anywhere there’s room to grow. It gives the entire area a yellowish hue.

A few houses are scattered on the distant mountains, a haze shadows the highest peaks, and billowing clouds are rising off in the distance. The haze is whitish contrasted against the dark mountains lining the horizon. It fades into a murky grey before briefly relinquishing its hold on the blue sky. The open sky fades into the wind wisped cloud line spreading out across the upper elevation creating what appears to be the top of the sky.

In the bottom of the valley, the smell of catalyzing resin from the surfboard factories blows in, pulling my attention away from the distant mountains. The smell is penetrating, intensified by the valley’s heat. It’s a heat that just smells dry, like I’m
drawing in heat alone and the moisture in my mouth isn’t bold enough to cool my
incoming breath.

OCEANSIDE INDUSTRIAL PARK

In the floor of the valley, the view of the distant peaks and river of mustard
surrenders to a pool of industrial buildings and commerce. The valley is filled with
production warehouses, storage units, bars, restaurants, and some scattered housing
tucked behind large sound walls just off the main road. At the next stoplight, the
smell of diesel overpowers the resin as an auto parts delivery truck and a long flatbed
with no logos wait at my left to enter the main complex. It doesn’t look like a park to
me.

Across the street, two people wait for the bus under the shade of a small hut
with a red tiled roof. The bus swings in and stops. The entire bus, aside from the
windows, is decorated with blue sky and clouds, and on the side in bold white letters
is written:

BREATHE EASY
POWERED BY NATURAL GAS

In October 1908 before the United States had time to set up its railroad tracks,
trolley lines, and other public transportation systems, Henry Ford released the Model
T. This happened so fast there was no time to react. The Model T essentially stopped
the development of public transportation. Now personal transportation is king and
public transportation has lost. But could it again be a thing of the future? Technology is always progressing, some good and some bad. And some new ideas begin as reactions to old technology and old ideas. More cars. More traffic. More pollution. This is an exponential domino effect. But will such actions be the catalyst to return to public transportation?

I pass through the rest of the industrial area and into a more residential part of town. The land is flat through the valley, and the buildings and overpasses block my view of the mountains. The traffic worsens. I wait.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch sight of a large bird. It lands on the side of the road in the white powdery dirt. It’s not normal dirt. It has that certain side-of-the-road-look to it. It’s made of bits of chipped off road, dust, cigarette butts, broken glass, remnants of recent construction, and whatever else settles and mixes in the swirling turbulence created by passing vehicles. A bird of prey? A hunter? It has light brown, tan and white markings. The bird isn’t huge but looks strong and agile against the white backdrop. It’s the bird I always call a Road Eagle, but it’s really a small falcon called a Kestrel. They are very common near roadways and have adapted to using power lines and telephone poles as lookouts in its search for food. But what is it doing so close to the road? In Silent Spring, Rachel Carson addresses how many different birds have adapted to a landscape modified by humans. She says:

From all over the world come echoes of the peril that faces birds in our modern world [...] through all these new, imaginative, and creative approaches to the problem of sharing our earth with other creatures
there runs a constant theme, the awareness that we are dealing with life—with living populations and all their pressures and counterpressures, their surges and recessions. (114 and 261).

While in Cordova, Alaska, I was working day and night and didn’t have much free time for leisure activities. When idle time was upon me, I found myself drifting off into the neglected land of sleep. But on one slow day at the fish processing plant, I volunteered to take off early, something I never did. I remember thinking, “I’m here to make money. Stay!” but something drew me away.

Everyone I knew was on the clock, so I had some time to myself. I strolled by the store, picked up a big bottle of Sheaf Stout and headed out to find a spot and relax in the summer sun. After drifting in and out of the doldrums between sleep deprivation and trying to pay attention to where feet were taking me, I found myself way out on the end of the jetty that protects the entrance to the harbor.

Out of the debris that had washed into the rocks, I found a weathered but flat piece of board and set it between two rocks. I popped open my stout and sat down to enjoy the afternoon, rejoicing in the first few moments of quiet I’d had in some time. No boats on the water. No people in sight. No clanking machinery. Nothing. Just me and my stout.

After a half-a-beers time, I noticed a large group of birds circling around high above the water and making quite a ruckus. Since I’ve always lived on the coast, my first thought was fucking seagulls, do they ever rest? I could see light and dark markings on the birds, but since the sun was behind them, I couldn’t make out details.
As they approached, I could tell they were too big to be seagulls. When they eventually passed in front of me, I could see they were circling and squabbling over a barge transporting garbage and to my shock the birds, fighting for trash were none other than our national emblem—the great Bald Eagle. It was a swarm of Bald Eagles.

Still lurking on the side of the road, the Kestrel shyly steps sideways, taking notice of its surroundings. Creeping up on a dead ground squirrel, the bird cautiously scans the scene, quickly tears a chunk of meat from the side of the roadkill, flies up, and perches on a power line above its prey.

A car horn sounds from behind.

“...pig eats shit...but only when he hungers...pigs in zen...”

The light is green. I bid farewell to my majestic scavenger.

“...pigs in zen...”

The music fades into the wind, but before I turn it up, the car in front of me slows. No warning. I look up. No. The car is merging into a line of cars circling around the golden arches. Didn’t I just pass a McDonalds?

As the car pulls into the left turn lane, the driver slows and stops. The turn lane is full, and the rear of the car juts out over the yellow lines into the left traffic lane. I stomp the gas and swerve around to keep on moving. On the bumper of the car is a big round sticker.
I stare at the sticker, and as I pass the restaurant, the circle of cars in the drive-thru wraps around the building and fills the entire parking lot. Just as I turn back, a sea of brake lights glows, the rear of the truck in front of me raises up, and all the vehicles on the road begin bunching up together. I slam on the brakes, wheels lock up, and tires screech. The back of my truck begins to lose grip with the asphalt. I stop. Sideways.

The smell of burnt rubber slams into my nose, overtaking my senses. My heart is pounding, and as I gaze past my white knuckles, I see the back of an SUV inches from my front bumper.

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The personalized logo on the back of the SUV stares back at me with an ominous tone. My stomach feels empty.

Unless one merely thinks man was intended to be an all-conquering and sterilizing power in the world, there must be some general basis for understanding what is best to do. This means looking for some
wise principle of co-existence between man and nature, even if it has
to be a modified kind of man and a modified kind of nature. (Elton
145)

So is the driver trying to bridge the gap here? Is he a conservationist trying to help
 modify man or is he just cashing in on the way the area is developed? Because I don’t
 see much modifying of man going on around here.

“Fuckin’ traffic lights,” I yell. “I should’ve of just taken the fuckin’ freeway.”
Silence.

I peel my hands from the wheel, take a long drink of water, and wipe away the
sweat dripping from my temples.

bbbbuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu uu
the slabs were poured where homes were to be built. Once the roads and home sites were marked and the skeletons of the walls were being erected, a landscape truck visited the property. Soon after the initial visit by the landscaper, tractor-trailer trucks periodically came to the complex with full-grown palm trees and scattered them around the neighborhood.

The project took much less time than I’d expected, and although I tried to avoid passing the scene, I did drive by occasionally. As the final phases of construction were almost complete, the landscapers returned with truckloads of sod and small plants, and in less than a week, they laid a green lawn throughout the entire area. All the homes came complete with fresh front and back yards, shrubs along the walls, and palms standing above with their fronds swinging in the breeze.

Once the road was open to the public, I toured the neighborhood with complete amazement. Part of the forest where I played as a child was now a subdivision ready for occupation. A sign at the entrance indicated that there were only eight units left. The transformation was complete. The thing that seemed strange and still doesn’t make sense to me is the fact that the developer leveled everything. He didn’t come in and mark the trees that could stay. He didn’t work at all with any of the natural surroundings. He just plowed the entire section of forest and started from scratch, but in the end, he used some of the same kinds of trees and plants that were there to begin with. And his product was complete in less than a year. For the trees to grow to the size they were prior to the development, the forest must have been untouched for hundreds of years. Nature was conquered. I guess it is more timely and
cheaper to start over than to try to harmonize.

No music. I don’t even remember the tape ending. I it pop out and grab the tape case sitting on the passenger side floorboards. With my heart still racing, I put in some reggae. Something a bit mellower.

“...easy skanking, skanking it slow...excuse me while I light my spliff...oh god I gotta take a lift...from reality I just can't drift...that's why I am staying with this riff...take it easy, easy skanking...”

Bob Marley’s voice comes to life.

I switch to the right lane and ease off the gas. I turn into the Albertson’s shopping plaza, park, and step out.
“Paper or plastic?”

I look up at the cashier. She smiles. It is an honest yet withheld kind of smile. Though she probably asks this question a hundred or more times a shift, she still doesn’t seem to know what to expect.

“Oh...I don’t need any bags,” I respond, looking over at a young man not yet twenty holding my gallon jug of water above the plastic bag dispenser.

“You sure?” he asks.

“Yeah, I can get it.”

“Need help out today?” the cashier asks.

“Nah...I think I can handle it.”

I place the groceries in a small window of shade on the passenger’s side floorboards, refill my water bottle from the jug, and sit on the tailgate of the truck. The glass door of the camper shell is open and blocks some of the sun. I lean back and take a long drink of water, which is still cool from the air-conditioning. A breath, deep and long, can go only so far.

Out on Mission, the traffic is lightening up. I turn around and look in the back of the truck. My gear is all mixed up bunched together toward the cab. I climb in and move things back to where they were. Sweat drips from my face.

“Fuckin’ traffic,” I snap, spinning back to the almost collision.

I hop back in the truck and fire it up.
"...they say the sun, shines for all...but in some people world, it never shine at all...they say love is a stream, that will find its course...some people life is a dream...so they making matters worse..."

The coast is clear. Smooth sailing. Just off to the north sits the grounds of Mission San Luis Rey. The terraced landscape and low set garden area lead up to a line of pepper trees along the front the perimeter. The old Spanish style building is surrounded by high white walls and sits in the center of the property. The walls look like they were designed to protect the structure from enemy attacks.

The road just past the mission is rough, cracked and swelling from beneath. As it leads around the grounds of a Lowe's, the pavement smoothes out where it has been recently repaved. The city must have rerouted the road to give the home improvement warehouse more space. How did they pull that off in such a real estate hungry area?

At this point, Mission Ave. Ts, and I'm herded onto highway 76, which many residents still call Mission. The wider road leads me into a newer part of town and modern tract homes cover the hills and fill the valleys. The squares of blue, tan, red, brown, and pink Spanish tile extend out in all directions rising above the spindles of bougainvillea that drip from the sound wall running parallel to the road. At first glance, they look like long lines of apartments, but looking up the streets, I can see that narrow patches of lush green lawn divide each home.

Along the grassy area between the road and the wall is a line of saplings. The fronds of palm trees and thin arms of eucalyptus reach just twenty or thirty feet in
the air, and farther away in the front and backyards of the homes, much larger pepper
tress, queen palms, eucalyptus and pine trees stand tall above the homes, providing
some respite from the summer sun. In *Ecology of Fear*, Mike Davis notes that
“Boyle Workman, one of Los Angeles’s pioneer real estate developers, put it, ‘Every
tree, every lawn, every blade of grass in this section as it exists today, is a forced
growth, made possible by man’s ingenuity in bringing water to what otherwise would
be a treeless waste’” (10). The developers who built these communities probably
cleared the hills and started from scratch just as the company in Florida cut a square
out of the forest.

The road begins rising from the lowest elevation of the valley floor, and as I
come to the top of the gradual rise, the blue sky comes back into view. The clear strip
of sky is broken by three puffy white clouds with long strands of moisture stretched
out by the wind. They look like giant jellyfish swimming up toward the top of the sky
and seem to have escaped from the grey haze still clinging to the mountains below.

Pouring out of one of the neighborhood streets is a wide stream of water.
The trail of water begins in front of one house close to the intersection and runs down
the street to a storm drain. The sprinklers are on and one must have been stepped on
or driven over. Water is bubbling out, forming a pool, and overflowing into the gutter.
I wonder how long the water has been flowing. Has a neighbor gone up to see if the
person is home and asked if they will turn the sprinklers off? Or maybe someone
already has, and the person responded, “Oh we just bought this house. They’re on
automatic. I don’t know how.” Or better yet, “Yeah, I noticed that the other day. I’ll
call the landlord later."

Traffic slows. The four lanes funnel into two. Off to my right there’s a woman riding a horse on the side of the road. She follows the road for a few hundred feet then turns onto a trail leading into Jefferies Ranch. She trots down the path and into the shade of a long corridor of junipers lining the streets. The tall spearlike trees are planted in a uniform row between the sidewalk and the road, a contrast to the freely sprawling pine at the entrance to the ranch community. The pine is at least a hundred feet, and the erratic branches must be thirty or forty feet long, some resting barely above the ground. Deeper into the neighborhood, the crowns of much taller shade trees surround the homes and branch out in all directions.

The few homes I can see from the road are laid out on large plots of land, leaving plenty of room on all sides, but most are hidden behind groups of pepper trees, queen palms, and jacaranda. Their wispy tops shimmer in the wind and provide a screen from passing motorists.

The wind seems to bring the tiny leaves of the pepper trees to life. Thousands of little leaves each dance independently, yet together they reflect the sun and create an incandescent green glow. Like waves of green light are moving through the branches, allowing me to see the wind.

Once I’m to the tip of the funnel and on the two-lane country road, traffic speeds up, spreads out, and like a line drawn on a map, the housing developments stop, and farmland decorates the hills as the road leads through parcels of old Oceanside settlement. These homes don’t line up. They are placed in the middle of
the hilltop or another practical location for tending the land and aren’t divided by fences. Scattered about the hillside are plots of tomatoes and other recently plowed areas void of anything but channels in the soil. Along the road and around the properties, there’s a medley of broken down bulldozers, dump trucks, and dilapidated buildings. A tractor with only splotches of chipping red paint left between the rust sits at the edge of a driveway, marking the entrance to one of the farms. Beginning at the edge of the farmland, the chaparral extends deep into the hills and blends into the haze, distinguishing the entrance into the natural landscape.

**OCEANSIDE PRODUCE**

5780 Mission Avenue

The San Luis Rey River runs through the valley nearby, and I can feel slight moisture in the air. More of a smell than a feeling. There’s a mild swampy odor. Not pungent like the smell of manure from the farms, just a slight hint of an algae bloom. Like rain hitting hot pavement but more distant. It’s noticeable but barely cuts through the dry heat, and is gone as fast as it came.

I don’t always notice the subtle changes in landscape, but with no passengers, observation is much easier. My only distractions are either my own thoughts or outside stimuli. When I’m with someone, a conversation can take me out, away from the scenery, away from the surroundings, and away from where I’m trying to go. But then on long straight-aways like the one leading to Las Vegas with nothing but the same mirage floating just above the pavement, a conversation can save me from falling asleep or just make a bit of the road pass quickly. Small talk with no purpose
should be reserved for trips where destination is everything. But I’m not on my way anywhere. I’m on my way to as close to nowhere as I can find.

A few miles ahead, the 76 passes through the city of Bonsall. So around the next bend, I turn onto Vista Way briefly before continuing east on Gopher Canyon Road, another two-lane road that winds through the hills of Vista routing me around the city.

The scenery abruptly changes. The sides of the road transform into tropical jungle, like I turned the corner into Central America. The lush green of the birds of paradise, the fan palms, and various fruit trees stand strong, yet out of place with the surrounding chaparral as a backdrop.

GANTER NURSERY
WHOLESALE TO THE PUBLIC
ENTER AHEAD ON LEFT

Along the fence, the light pinkish purple flowers of the bougainvillea reach through the chain links toward the street, their tough dry thorns ready to fend off anyone trying to climb the fence. A clump of bamboo lines the back fence with banana trees and bird’s of paradise in front, and a giant date palm is in the center with its yellow branches drooping down under the weight of its own fruit. The clustered flora of the nursery takes up the entire corner where the two streets meet, and the plant life extends into itself and beyond my sight. Although out of place, it’s a beautiful sight, and the fragrance from the blooming flowers hidden behind the wall
of palms fills the air briefly, dissipating as I pass around the next bend.

The residences and businesses along Gopher Canyon are mixed together, and it looks like many of the nurseries and farms serve as work and home. Covering an entire hillside and wrapping into the next valley are rows of farmland layered with black plastic sheets. The strawberries must be beginning to grow, and the farmers have set out the plastic to keep the delicate fruit from falling to the ground and rotting. And on the other side of the road, rows of palm trees lead up to the front door of what looks like a standard home. No signs to indicate a business and no parking area, just a multicolored brick home with a normal driveway leading to the garage. Must be a hobby that turned into supplementary income for the family. Plenty of sunshine out here—just add water and a farm is born.

I take a look in my mirrors. There are no cars in front of me or behind me. I slow down, and the whir of the wind calms. I’m stunned by the lack of cars and don’t know quite what to do. I slow down and notice the music has stopped. Instead of putting in a new tape, I turn the radio off.

It’s strange, I double-check the mirrors, but there are still no vehicles. I keep looking. It’s funny, I’m so used to fighting for space on the roads something feels awry. And it’s ironic because all I want to do is get away, but now that I get a slight break, I don’t know what to do. I’m glad, but deep down I know it won’t last.

At the top the next hill, the view opens to more hills rolling eastward. There are no homes, no businesses, and no farms. Only chaparral. The hills in the distance are dry and covered with short shrubs, but in the lower parts of the valley, oaks and
pepper trees break the chaparral. The shrubs cover the entire hillside and are all about the same height. They are no taller than waist high or so and look more like an extension of the hillside, forming a smooth green surface that looks as if I could walk on top. From even farther away, the hills would probably look more like green grass-covered mountains.

**LITTERING AND ILLEGAL DUMPING SUBJECT TO PROSECUTION**

In the lower parts of the valley, a few homes come into view but quickly disappear behind the tree line. If it weren’t for the rises in the road, the only indication of any homes would be the mailboxes and the dirt driveways leading through the tunnel of trees that has been planted between the road and the property lines. The residents must want privacy from the road, and I’m sure the trees block the sound of passing cars in addition to peering eyes.

Off in the distance, citrus orchards stand out like sore thumbs on the hillsides. The lush green of the trees looks out of place on the heat-scorched backdrop. It looks as if at one time the entire area was one big orchard and now has been broken up into smaller plots. The rows of trees are broken by newer development, but when I follow an imaginary line, the rows of the separate but nearby orchards line up.

On the opposite side of the road, the short light green grass of a golf course
peeks through the oaks planted as barriers and fills the valley with a bright green floor that reflects the light and gives the impression that the valley is illuminated. Through the trees, a small brook and a few sand traps break the giant field of green, meticulously groomed with a buzz cut that's never allowed to grow back.

**VISTA VALLEY COUNTRY CLUB**

Some years ago the game of golf was commonly regarded in this country as a kind of social ornament, a pretty diversion for the rich... Today scores of cities are building municipal golf courses to make golf available to the rank and file of their citizens. The same change in point of view has occurred toward most other outdoor sports—the frivolities of fifty years ago have become the social necessities of today. (Leopold 226)

Past the gated entrance, the land immediately returns to chaparral. The flowerless dried spikes from century and agave plants rise from the powdery dirt. No more grass. No more ponds. No more water. The natural setting returns.

**SPEED LIMIT**

**50**

**RADAR ENFORCED**

The speedometer indicates 35. I don’t speed up. There are no longer tall trees.
lining the road, but I still can’t see many homes. I know there are many out of sight because the access road I just passed had twenty or more mailboxes at the entrance.

**FOR SALE**

3 RESIDENTIAL LOTS  
2 1.5 ACRE RESIDENTIAL  
1 2 ACRE COMMERCIAL  
READY FOR DEVELOPMENT

The arrow points down a dirt drive, which disappears over a small hillside. The road becomes very steep, and I’m now passing the citrus groves that I could see from the top of the last rise. On top of the highest and steepest part of the mountain, completely barren aside from occasional clumps of dried and dead scrub, is a cluster of five or more trees surrounding a trailer and a greenhouse. The air cools, and a slight bite of citrus wafts in. The smell is like the odor of zest from a lemon but faint. Someone is probably trimming tree branches in the orchard. About half way up the hill, a long line of traffic is backed up behind a big-rig that’s struggling up the grade.

Once at the top, interstate 15 comes into view, cutting a concrete swath between the chaparral and a small mountain covered with boulders in the background. I can see the tops of the vehicles heading north on the freeway, and I have a clear view of the southbound lane. The traffic is heavy but moving fast. Most of the cars in front of me and behind me turn onto the southbound ramp heading toward San Diego. But one car speeds up behind me. And as we pass under the overpass, the hum of tires on the cement sounds like a giant swarm of bees.

Ahead, Gopher Canyon ends. Leaving me with no choice but to turn left or
right. I let off the gas. I have no idea which way to go, and the guy in the car behind me is so close to the back of my truck I can’t see his bumper. He’s blaring his horn, waving his arms around, and yelling. I pull off on the side, making sure he can’t get by until we are both going less than 10 m.p.h.

“Fuck you idiot,” I yell, knowing that neither he nor I will ever hear what the other said, as he speeds past revving his engine and holding down the horn until he is well down the road.

<OLD HWY 395
CHAMPAGNE BL>

<CASTLE CREEK INN
DEER PARK WINERY>

<SAN LUIS REY DOWNS CC
<CHAMPAGNE LAKES RV RESORT

TO OLD CASTLE RD>
WELK RESORT CENTER>

GAS>
<FOOD>
<Lodging>

RIGHT LANE
MUST
TURN RIGHT
I turn off the engine and sit idly for a few moments. What is up with people? I mean how many seconds did I take from that guy? Why is everyone in such a fucking hurry? Do they even know where they are going? Or why? I mean really going. Yeah, I know work starts at 8 or 9, but does that guy even know why he’s working?

I feel so distant from other people, like I’m part of a different tribe. And I just don’t feel like getting mad anymore, even though they really piss me off. And who are they anyway? I don’t know them. They don’t know me. And as we pass each other, fingers raised, none of us will ever know the other. We are safe from contact. Safe from really knowing. Isolated behind walls of steel and glass.

I guess I shouldn’t get mad. I should just pity the situation. A good, steady job. 9 to 5. Just an hour commute each way. Company benefits. What else could you ask for? Living paycheck to paycheck. Football season is always right around the corner. Now that’s happiness. No way. Football and work for most people are a convenient way to hide. I look at their faces. They’re holed up in their expensive cars, listening to the morning talk show on the radio, but they’re not smiling.

I know I needed to leave, but I’m now beginning to realize why. If I didn’t leave, something bad was bound to happen. But I still have to go back. I signed my name to the lease, and I’m eventually gonna have to report to someone to make some cash. Fuckin’ responsibilities. No wonder so many people take little pills before work each morning. I won’t do it.
I could just go away. Will I be missed? Maybe for a couple of weeks, but there’s plenty of others to take my spot. But where’s away though? I’m looking around, always searching. I guess east has to be it. Because north and south yield more of the same and west, well, I don’t have a boat and humans aren’t that crafty yet. But what’s east? Mountains? Desert? Then more of the same, and I’ve never been able to leave the coast for long. I don’t even care if I find my answers in the quiet of the mountains, I just want to stop asking the same old questions over and over and over.

For a moment I think it’s quiet, but then I notice the hum of the freeway has replaced the noise of motion. The constant hum is broken each time an eighteen-wheeler passes. The sound becomes deeper and louder, like a small amount of rubber from the tires wears off with each rotation of the wheels as they dig a groove into the cement squares of the freeway. And since each square is the same size, the passing vehicles create a thumping rhythm as the tires pass over the gaps between the squares.

I sit staring at the street signs. I don’t recognize any of the names.

“Shit, after all these years living here, I figured I would be able to find my way.”

The road that leads left and right is Champagne Blvd., which is no help. I decide to dig through my glove box for the third time and look behind and under the seat. No map. And now I have to piss.

I notice that more cars are turning left than right, which could mean anything or nothing at all. One way, or maybe both ways, must continue east somehow.
Now that I’m stopped, the heat swells. My impatience grows. It can’t be this hot here naturally. The cement in the freeway and the exhaust of the cars must be adding to the heat.

I step out of the truck. I study both directions, but they’re essentially the same. Chaparral, foothills and boulders leading up to lonely peaks. I have interconnected roadways to lead me around, yet I’m still having trouble figuring out which way to go. I wonder how frustrating it was for the pioneers to pass through this heat not knowing if they’d ever find a coast.

On the far side of the shoulder, there’s a chain-link fence, which blocks me from wandering into the field for a piss. Where’s a public toilet when you need one? I’d even settle for a sauna-hot-porta-potty at this point. All these people in all these cars using the roads everyday. I guess the state figures they’ll rely on gas stations or other private businesses for facilities because I haven’t seen one this whole trip.

Just as I’m about to climb back in the truck and randomly pick a direction, a big Ford F350 pulls into the park-and-ride lot that I hadn’t noticed. Two guys, who look like construction workers, step out of the truck. I run over to them before they have time to unload gear and part ways.

“Hey guys, do either of you live ’round here?” I ask as they both stop what they’re doing and look up.

“I don’t, but he does,” one of them says, pointing to his buddy.

“Great. Do you know how I can go east from here without getting on the freeway?”
“Where ya headin’ to?” he asks, as I walk up to the truck.

“East into the mountains.”

“Well I ain’t been out that way in a long time, but if you turn right here,” he says pointing to where Gopher Canyon ends. “And then take that first left on Old Castle Road it’ll take ya to the S6. From there I think you turn right, but I really don’t know.”

“How far’s Old Castle?”

“It’s right there. You can see it,” he says and points to a road just a couple hundred yards down Champagne.

“Thanks guys. Take it easy,” I say, walking off.

The two guys go back to separating their gear, and I walk back to my truck. When I was in the parking lot, I noticed a big sprawling live oak off to the side of the parking lot. So I drive down the hill and pull in and park where the big truck pulled out. I get out and scurry up the short embankment. The tree is a perfect spot. It has five separate trunks coming from the same spot and has branches that reach down almost to the ground. I slip in between two of the branches and piss.

The tree sits high enough on the embankment that it provides some shade for the parking area. The shadows don’t extend long like they do in the morning and the
evening, but the long branches hang over enough for the short shadows to cover the back of my truck. The temperature is still blazing hot, but without the sun beaming down, it feels cooler. I finish the rest of the water in my bottle and refill it from the jug, which is now warm yet still refreshing. I pour some in my hand and splash it on my face and neck.

The shade from the live oak is extending slightly eastward. The sun has just passed its peak.

I sit back in the driver’s seat and turn the ignition on without starting the engine. No music. I know the roads ahead will be slow enough for the sound to cut through the wind, so I pick up the tape case and search through it.

Since taking a leak, I feel much calmer. I guess I needed to get off the road for a couple minutes. The band names stare back at me. I don’t want anything too hard but not too mellow either. I just want some good road music. I stop at Rush. Perfect. “Hemispheres” should get me going. I pull it out of the case, pop it in the deck, and before it starts, I hit rewind.

“...coming up next a look at the traffic...” the radio blares out. I switch the mode so the radio won’t play as the tape rewinds.

I pull out onto Champagne, turn left on Old Castle Road, and once again I’m heading east. The sun is slightly behind me and not having it shine directly into the cab makes the air seem instantly cooler. And now it should be easier to tell which way is east.

“...when our weary world was young...the struggle of the ancients first
began...the gods of love and reason sought alone to rule the fate of man...they battled through the ages...but still neither force would yield...the people were divided...every soul a battlefield..."
valley after hill after valley

At the junction of the two roads, another golf course leers through the branches of a long line of live oaks. It looks like those who built the course planted them along the perimeter between the course and the drainage ditch many years ago. The wall of trees seems to serve as a wind block, a screen, and a ball catcher. I guess the patrons don’t want to disturb motorists with stray balls, and they don’t want to be disturbed by passing cars:

Confronted by desert, the first thing Americans want to do is change it. People say that they “love” the desert, but few of them love it enough to live there. I mean the real desert, not in a make-believe city like Phoenix with exotic palms and golf-course lawns and a five-hundred-foot fountain and artificial surf. (Reisner 4)

WELCOME TO
VALLEY CENTER
AN UNINCORPORATED COMMUNITY
OF THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

On Old Castle, the entire landscape has been altered. It is hard to tell what is natural. The live oaks growing parallel with the road are so old they seem natural, like they planted themselves, but then I pass around the next corner, and the landscape opens up into an arson’s dream, a land of a million dried matchsticks ready for a spark from a muffler or a cigarette butt. It looks as if it hasn’t rained in years. But natural. The vegetation is random. The shrubs and grasses grow wherever they find
root, and the occasional tree appears with no apparent order.

The road narrows.

The reduced speed ahead is a welcome road sign. I slow as the road winds into a residential area.

"...the people were delighted...coming forth to claim their prize...they ran to build their cities...and converse among the wise...but one day the streets fell silent...yet they knew not what was wrong...the urge to build these fine things...seemed not to be so strong..."

The homes are situated together with a backdrop of steep hills, much steeper than the ones to the west. The hills rise quickly just beyond the back of the community. There is only one road leading into the neighborhood, which spreads out into a combination of single and multi-family homes. From the front doors of the homes closest to the road, lush green lawns extend out across the front yards, dip into the drainage ditch, and have begun growing over the edge of the road.

In *Ecology of Invasions by Animals and Plants*, Charles Elton describes the
relationship between altered and natural landscapes. He writes about balance:

We are faced with the life-and-death need not just to find out new
technological means of suppressing this plant or that animal, but of rethinking
and remodeling and rearranging much of the landscape of the world that has
already been so much knocked about and modified by man; while at the same
time preserving what we can of real wilderness containing natural
communities. (110)

But unfortunately, “when humans interact with nature, we frequently wind up
redecorating it, selfishly” (Bekoff 179). In this part of the chaparral, humans have
added lily ponds and wide-sprawling lawns. But are there any signs of a modified
man? I don’t see it. I see the same intentions here in a waterless area as I see in the
tropical Southeast United States. Yes, lawns have a natural and beautiful look, but are
they a necessary part of life? Are they fair? Or do they take away more than they
give? Is sowing and watering a lawn in the Southwest a selfish decision?

The contrast between the little community and the mountain behind is abrupt.
The trees and homes stand out in front of the hills in the background. The scene is
menacing. The mountain looms over the neighborhood, and some of the large
boulders on top of the mountain look like they are barely holding on. I’m sure it’s
only a matter of time before one breaks free and rolls into the neighborhood. Why
would anyone build a home, much less a community, beneath something so
inevitable? And I’m sure if they don’t worry about the rocks overhead, they feel a bit
uneasy each time they pass the small swaths cut into the hillside by previous brush
fires. What if the wind had picked up and shifted that day?

In the middle and toward the bottom of the mountain, it looks like at one time it was all rock, one big boulder. But as time wore on, wind and rain eroded the rock, slowly chipping away and breaking the mountain into smaller and smaller pieces. Now sand fills the spaces between the smaller rocks, and wind has blown seeds into the sand. The seeds have rooted and now shrubs and small trees send roots into the cracks further breaking up the rock.

THE
FARMSTAND
HOME GROWN PRODUCE
family owned & operated

Past the small community, the landscape opens. It's the last stretch of homes pressed together. The road winds up and over a foothill, and the residences are spread farther apart and are only on the right side of the road. I catch glimpses of the properties through holes in the dense oleander hedges. The white flowers with yellow centers, the deep reds, and pinkish purples rise from the fence line upwards of 20 feet in the air, blocking most of the view of the estates. The altering colors, drought tolerance and dense foliage make the oleander varieties perfect fits for fence line hedges. They can grow just about anywhere and provide privacy in exchange for a little water.

Horse stables, long drives, and bridges over the ditch between the road and the properties decorate the landscape. I look to the right and then to the left. A narrow road divides two completely different worlds. The power of human kind is amazing.
Water. These individuals or those before them have transformed a dry chaparral, void of anything but various types of sagebrush and chamise, and a few scrub oaks, into multiple-acre estates with lush lawns and shade trees reaching one hundred feet.

Driving by these properties is like passing through an invisible fog. The air suddenly becomes cool and moist. Then it’s gone. And then it’s back again. No warning. When I pass a citrus grove, the invisible moisture is much more noticeable. But I still never see anything in the air and nothing collects on the windshield. At night, would my headlights reflect off the water droplets hanging in the air?

A culvert passes under the road at certain spots. In the bottom, there’s no running water only weeds and tall grasses sticking out separated by the occasional spot of mud or small puddle. But under the private bridges leading into the estates, there is a small flow of water. The weeds are trimmed, and the green lawn clings to the sides. Under the grass, water from sprinklers or from past rains has eaten away the soil along the bank, and now there’s a ledge and spindles of grass shoots reach down toward the water.

The road rises again switching back and forth up and over another small mountain covered in dense chaparral. As the elevation increases, the dampness in the drainage ditch disappears, and the Earth, where water once stood, is cracked and dry. The ditch eventually turns into just a small dip on the side of the road. No sign of water. Dust-covered glass bottles and dried broken tree limbs lie in the lowest part of the dip. The water that does periodically flood the ditch leaves so quickly that it is as
if it were barely there. It leaves its mark only by eroding away the dirt in the lowest
lying areas and relocating items small enough to be carried by the current.

In My First Summer in the Sierra, John Muir makes note of this, but instead of
witnessing the dry and cracked channels of dirt, he watched the water flow. While
hiking in the wilderness in 1869, Muir wrote, “In this fall—one of the most wonderful
in the world—the water does not seem to be under the dominion of ordinary laws, but
rather as if it were a living creature, full of the strength of the mountains and their
huge, wild joy”(110). What ordinary laws? Laws of nature? Laws created by man?
The waterless landscape before me makes me wonder how these laws apply to an
ecosystem that is void of Muir’s “living creature” because the water in this area rarely
comes on its own. It comes through a system based on human involvement. Humans
have created laws for the water. From rivers, to lakes, to pipes, to canals, to garden
hoses, the water here doesn’t fit Muir’s description. Have we killed the water?

Where the mountain rises directly from the side of the road is more of the
same. Higher up on the mountain, small grooves cut into the land by rain weave their
way around the clumps of shrubbery and down to the valley floor. Closer to the road,
the grooves become larger and mark where the small streams of water came together
and cut deeper grooves in the dirt before pouring into the ditch. The only breaks in
the chaparral are homes, citrus groves, or swaths cut by the power company when
they installed the lines. Where there was no water, water now exists, and plants and
animals (humans included) are able to thrive. Although the chaparral is becoming
more and more widespread, an occasional driveway sneaks up, and before you know
it, you’ve gone past.

At times in these mountains and valleys, it is difficult to get a sense of direction. If it weren’t for the road and the position of the sun, I wouldn’t know which direction to go. And when the sun hides behind one of the mountain peaks, navigation proves more difficult. As I continue upward and the distance I can see expands, the dry landscape still extends past the realm of my vision, disappearing into the horizon.

I can only imagine what traveling through these hills and valleys must have been like prior to settlement. No roads. No maps. No local knowledge. If a fogbank rolled in, travel would become futile. How did they see beyond this hostile environment? Even when clouds formed and these travelers looked skyward for relief from the heat, many times the rain never fell:

Rainclouds in the desert seldom mean rain, because the heat reflected off the earth and the ravenous dryness can vaporize a shower in midair, leaving the blackest-looking cumulonimbus trailing a few pathetic ribbons of moisture that disappear before reaching the ground. And if rain does manage to fall to earth, there is nothing to hold it, so it races off in evanescent brown torrents, evaporating, running to nowhere. (Reisner 4)

Chaparral and desert are very different, but the farther east I go, the more the chaparral is drying out. The many months, even years, crossing the desert and then the mountains must have made time and climate of little consequence. I don’t think I would have made it past Phoenix. I’m only beginning my entrance into a semi-desert,
and the heat is already draining my energy. The pioneers must have kept moving west out of pure hope. They had no choice but to continue west in search of the myth of a coast to relieve them from what must have seemed like an eternity in the desert. Or was the chaparral already a relief from the high desert?

Once on top of the highest peak in this small mountain chain, I can see down into a large estate. The structures look completely out of place, behind them is a group of old live oak that covers acres of the valley floor, and the lush property as a whole looks like a pool of green surrounded by brown walls on all sides. On top of the mountain, there are no homes just powerlines climbing up and over the mountain then dropping down into the next valley. A group of crows are lined up on one of the powerlines, and they take turns diving down and checking out something on the side of the road, which I can’t see. Not one of them lands though. They just swoop down over the edge of the road and then return to their perch on the line. I can’t tell if they are afraid of the road and the cars or are just unsure as to whether they have found some sort of food or not. It’s like they are each checking out the situation, and then after they have all had a look, they will collectively decide what to do. Safety in numbers is my guess. Crows always seem ahead of the game, always aware beyond most birds. They seem old and wise.

The road winds around the backside of the mountain and drops into the next valley. I look around on both sides of the road, and I feel as if I’m driving in a big circle.
This valley looks the same as the last, which looked the same as the one before. It seems that no matter which valley I’m in, people have searched around and found a section flat enough to develop. When the hillsides are too steep, there is nothing, but then around the next corner, the land flattens out, and there is a line of homes, estates, or a mixture of the two.

Around the next bend is a huge citrus grove. The trees covering the hillside look like they were planted by helicopter. They’re on the edge of the hill clinging to the ground, and many are leaning over the ledge fighting the pull of gravity. To harvest the land must be an incredible chore. It looks like they would have to rappel down to pick the fruit. I wouldn’t even approach those trees without some sort of anchor hooked to a tree farther up on the flatter part of the land.

LILAC ROAD

I pull off on the side of the road and get out. Dust from the roadside envelops me. Lilac. I thought I was on Old Castle. That guy didn’t say anything about Lilac Road. I look around and try to remember if I passed a place in the road where it divided. No. I didn’t see anything. No sign. No turn. No fork. After a couple minutes and being dusted by a few passing cars, I decide to just stay on Lilac and hope for the best. Nothing changes for miles as I drop down the backside of a mountain.
The road once again ends. Can’t go straight, just left or right. And the intersection is in bad shape. The road is torn up in both directions and steel plates cover holes dug into the road. Streets signs are mingled with real estate signs and construction zone signs.

“...the cities were abandoned...and the forests echoed song...they danced and lived as brothers...they knew love could not be wrong...”

The whole scene is confusing. Cars are all stopped at the light, and I’m caught in the middle not knowing which way to turn.

“...food and wine they had aplenty...and they slept beneath the stars...the people were contented...and the gods watched from afar...”

But at least the guy who gave me directions said Old Castle ends. I can’t be too far off. He thought it was to the right, and it seems most of the turns I’ve made have been to the right, which have taken me south for a short time and then they turn eastward. The light changes, and I follow the flow onto San Diego County Route 6. Valley Center Road. How appropriate.
left or right or wrong

The S6 passes through downtown Valley Center and is definitely the main vein through the valley. It caters to higher traffic flow and is under heavy construction. As I pass through the downtown area, there are realty offices everywhere and signs pointing off in all directions selling homes and property. The road leads over a small mountain, and I downshift to accommodate for the grade increase. Due to construction, Jersey Barriers separate the two lanes.

SPEED LIMIT 55 RADAR ENFORCED

With the gas pedal to the floor, I laugh at the sign. My speedometer reads just under 50 mph. Sometimes on these windy roads, I accommodate ahead of time for the grade, but when I don’t notice subtle increases, my truck bogs out. The small engine has trouble maintaining speed uphill. Toyota four-cylinder engines are great except when it comes to traveling at high speeds through the mountains. They make it over, but it takes awhile.

I look in my rearview mirror, and the red hood of a full size truck stares back. It’s too close to tell what kind of truck, and the driver is weaving back and forth, trying to see if there is room to pass. He backs off a bit. I look again, and he’s back on my ass. The road is winding back and forth up the mountain, so there is no room for a
passing lane. There’s no turnout, and I can’t go any faster. When I look in the mirror as the road turns, there’s another car behind him. Now both are vying for room to pass. It’s like NASCAR at 50 m.p.h.

Around the next bend, the Jersey Barriers angle to the middle of the road, and a passing lane emerges. I lose the race. The truck and the car both go flying past, still swerving, and as I look over, both drivers have one hand on the wheel and the other hand gripping a cell phone pressed to their ear. I slightly let off the gas, so the truck doesn’t have to work so hard.

Finally, the highest part of the mountain pass ends, and the road leads down into another valley. This time it’s a large expanse of flat land. The mountains still rise high to the east but are growing smaller as I descend with none ahead. A haze fills the valley like a pool of gray air. The bright sun passes through the haze, but as it passes through, rays reflect off the water in the air and beam back upward. I can’t tell if it’s moisture from a cool night lingering in the valley, trapped by the mountains or smog.

Even though the mountains are becoming smaller, they are too steep to develop, and there are no homes through this part of Valley Center. On the east side of the road, the chaparral looks dry and dusty, but on the west side the same shrubs are much greener. The east side lies in the direct sun until the lower west peaks block the light. The west side is the opposite. It gets the milder morning sun and then spends most of the afternoon in the shade of its own peak. The difference is amazing. I wonder how developers deal with this scenario. On the eastern sides of these mountains, the view is better, and I bet that on clear days residents can see the ocean
from the top. But the afternoon sun is difficult to block on the exposed peaks, and it must get unbearably hot. Even though on the west side the taller eastern peaks block most of the view, it’s much cooler.

In the valley floor, the haze fades away, but I know it’s just an illusion. From on top of the mountain, I could see it hanging in the air, but now that I’m in the midst of the haze, I can no longer see it, but the glare coming through blinds me even through sunglasses.

THE SAN DIEGO AQUEDUCT

A couple hundred feet off my right is a large cement canal. It looks like a giant drainage ditch. The canal is a man-made arroyo, dry as a bone this time of year. When the water flows, I’m sure it looks like a river, channeled down from the local mountains, the Sierras, and maybe even the Rockies. Making sure that no overflow or snowmelt or rain goes to waste, the water is corralled and sent to wait in reservoirs until it is needed during the dry season when the rains don’t fall.

“The Colorado River rises high in the Rockies, a trickle of frigid snowmelt bubbling down the west face of Longs Peak, and begins its fifteen-hundred-mile, twelve-thousand-foot descent to the Gulf of California” (Reisner 6). The natural flow of the river is no longer allowed because a population in need of water stymies the estimated six-year journey down the Colorado, and the San Diego Aqueduct plays a significant role in the water’s diverted trip through California. It carries this mountain water from Los Angeles into Temecula, Escondido and Poway before it empties into
and is trapped by San Vicente Reservoir, about 20 miles northeast of the city of San Diego. Though this aqueduct ends here, the water continues on its way to San Diego.

As population and demand grow, so do situations of dire emergency. The San Diego Water Authority is planning for such scenarios. The San Vicente Pipeline, a part of the Emergency Storage Project, when complete in about 2007, will take water to a second aqueduct near Mercy Road and interstate 15, and plans for connecting other reservoirs and Lake Hodges are in the works. Hodges is a small lake southwest of Escondido and supplies water to communities in North County. Due to years of drought, the lake’s level is at about 13 percent. Upon completion, the pipeline will alleviate dependence on rain and will keep lake levels consistent. In the event of a natural or unnatural disaster or any other interruption in the water flow from the Colorado, the interconnected reservoir system will enable quick movement of water between the aqueducts and the millions of people using the resources in their homes and businesses throughout the greater San Diego area.

Though the homes and businesses that depend on the Colorado are close to the Gulf of California, most of the water is channeled to other areas prior to reaching its intended destination in the gulf. Instead, the water is spread between seven states and Mexico, and here in California, the mighty Colorado “irrigates the Imperial Valley and the rest allows Los Angeles and San Diego to exist (Reisner 7). It’s a maze of waterways and pipelines. A complex web of necessity. As Aldo Leopold says, “The water must be confused by so much advice” (126).
For much of the trip, the water travels in pipes, hiding from evaporation, but the cement canal on the side of the road is open to the air, which allows some of the Colorado water to escape into the atmosphere. This is most of the waste that occurs along a man-made river system designed to utilize each and every drop of the precious resource, which allows the oasis of Southern California to exist.

No belief is more deeply rooted in the Southern California mind than the self-serving conviction that Los Angeles would be Death Valley except for the three great aqueducts that transfer the stolen snowmelt of the Sierra and Rockies to its lawns and pools. The city is advertised as the triumph of superengineers like William Mulholland who built rivers in the desert. (Davis 10)

But is Southern California an oasis or a mirage?

The answer may lie somewhere between, and California, which has fared quite well in short modern droughts, could see longer droughts and less water in a pattern of climate change that extends over thousands of years rather than decades. Drought happens. This is undeniable. Farming civilizations throughout recorded history and beyond have been lost to drought or lost large percentages of their populations on long treks in search of water. In “Afaganistan: Between War and Peace,” Edward Girardet’s investigation of a struggling people may shed some light on how the less developed country has not fared well in a relatively short drought:

For a week Paprok and much of the rest of Afghanistan had been drenched by rain and, in the higher regions, snow—a welcome respite
from a four-year drought... Since the drought began many Afghan farmers had missed two, even three, harvests, unable to plant their wheat on the nearly ten million acres of rain-fed lands that constitute more than half Afghanistan's cultivable area. Other farmers had to sell their livestock as a desperate last resort. Meanwhile, Kabul's reservoirs had shrunk to little more than ankle-deep puddles barely the size of football fields. (35)

Here we see a country, a people without the money to engineer man-made rivers suffer when the sky decides to not open for a relatively short period of time.

Though money and engineering have led Californians through short periods of drought, Mike Davis uses a study by Scott Stine, a paleoclimatologist, to illustrate the possibility of more extensive periods of drought for the California region. Using ancient stumps exposed in Mono Lake during the drought of the nineties, Stine found evidence of two catastrophic droughts in the Middle Ages. One lasted an estimated 220 years and the other 140 years:

Could epic drought return to Southern California in the near future? As Stine admits, "This is the $64,000 question. Although we can model the atmospheric circulation most likely to produce and sustain a drought for centuries—a contraction of the polar cold fronts—we don't know what caused the circulation to change in the first place. We don't know where the crucial climate switch is located." [and] as California state climatologist Bill Mork has acknowledged, "If you
were to project [the medieval] conditions into today, it’s obvious that we couldn’t survive in the present infrastructure with the agriculture and the cities that we got. We just wouldn’t have enough water.” (23 and 24)

So has all this engineering created an oasis or a mirage? Many know that the situation is volatile. In a 1970 government report on California climate, Robert Elford, ESSA State Climatologist writes, “The California Water Plan is designed to meet a major portion of this need but further development will no doubt be required as population continues to grow [and the state had already been] the number-one farming state for 20 consecutive years” (7). So what regulates this dire need for water? Greed. Optimism. And what happens if the snow decides not to fall? Divide. Conquer. What if there isn’t enough water draining out of the mountains to fill the canyons that are now Lake Mead and Lake Powell, and then what happens to smaller more localized reservoirs like San Vicente that are even further down the line? What if the Imperial Valley decides to say, “No”? Will the feds step in? They’ve agreed to accept compensation for the transfer of water along The All American Canal into the heart of San Diego this time, but what happens when the deal expires in 50 or 100 years? The scenario is so far-gone that the possibilities are endless.

In 1963, the Bureau (of Reclamation) closed the gates to Glen Canyon Dam. As Lake Powell filled, the flow of fresh water below it was greatly reduced. At the same time, the Welton-Mohawk drain was pouring water with a salinity content of sixty-three hundred parts per
million directly into the Colorado. The salinity of the river—what was left of it—soared to fifteen hundred parts per million at the Mexican border. The most important agricultural region in all of Mexico lies right below the border, utterly dependent on the Colorado River; we were giving the farmers slow liquid death to pour over their fields. The Mexicans complained bitterly, to no avail. By treaty, we had promised them a million and a half acre-feet of water. But we hadn’t promised them usable water. (Reisner 7)

And yes, once the situation was dire, the United States government, under the leadership of Nixon, sent representatives who worked out a deal to build a desalination plant at the border. Why is it that the decisions of so few affect so many? There are close to 3 million documented people living in San Diego County and close to 10 million more in the county of Los Angeles. If the water runs out, where will they go? Will the cities become graveyards of cement, wood, and glass? San Diego is at the end of the pipe. The water comes down the man-made rivers, we purchase what we are allotted, and some still trickles to Mexico. But a doomsday scenario, like the one that salted the fields of Northern Mexico, is not unrealistic. And earthquakes are not rare occurrences at more northern sections of the pipelines and aqueducts. They happen. They destroy. And can shake, crack, open, and very easily end the flow of water into Southern California.

So we see that underdeveloped, money starved countries can’t deal with four years of drought. We see how California, a rich community, is able to cope with six
years of drought, and in the situation of Northern Mexico, we see what happens when lines are drawn between countries that equally depend on the same resource. But what happens when a decade-long drought slowly morphs into a century-long drought? I doubt sympathies between nations will be a high priority.

Ahead the road leads through a section of trailer parks. Just like that. Just down the hill. The development changes from estates and citrus groves on the tops of mountains with views and pools to trailer parks cramped together with wheels for foundations and asphalt for front yards.

MOUNTAIN VIEW ESTATES >>

The sign points down the main drag of a trailer park, and a dirt road leads out from the back of the trailer park up the mountain to a line of homes under construction. Some have walls and roofs and others are just skeletons with stacks of lumber surrounding the foundations. Cranes, earthmovers, motor scrapers and bulldozers scurry around the compound like ants preparing for a rain. Some are leveling and packing the road, preparing for asphalt, and others are working on scraping and packing the hills for more foundations. I guess the steeper mountainsides can be developed. It just takes more effort.

WELCOME
TO
ESCONDIDO

Escondido. What? I don’t want to go to or even through Escondido. How did I
end up here? Valley Parkway. Shit, this road is taking me back to the 15. Just where I
don’t want to go. The scenery quickly changes. The two-lane road expands to four
and then adds a middle turning lane. Schools, shopping plazas, stoplights, apartment
complexes and more stoplights. Instantly the temperature increases. The wind coming
in the truck is hotter, but that doesn’t even last. Traffic backs up, and I come to a stop
behind a long line of cars waiting at the signal.

“...the universe divided...as the heart and mind collided...with the people left
unguided...for so many troubled years....”

Stifling, stinky asphalt and diesel billows in, exaggerating my annoyance with
the cement cityscape and string of red lights ahead of me.

“...in a cloud of doubts and fears...their world was torn asunder into hollow
hemispheres...”

WE CLEAN
ESCONDIDO!
LITTER REMOVAL
PROGRAM

The line of cars stops me in front an elementary school. Just across the
sidewalk and caught in the chainlike fence that surrounds the parking lot is a slew of
paper, take-out cups, and plastic bags. The cups are on the ground pushed up against
the bottom of the fence, the paper is blowing around in circle trapped in strange
swirling roadside winds, and one of the plastic bags is caught on the top of the fence.
Every time a gust of air passes, the bag fills, like it’s dancing, trying to escape the
confines of the fence.
The light changes and the line of traffic moves ahead, but before I pass through the intersection, the light turns red. Damn it, this is exactly what I’m trying to avoid. It’s a fucking wasteland.

“...some fought themselves...some fought each other...most just followed one another...lost and aimless like their brothers...”

I look back over and watch as the bag struggles to break free from the fence. Each time a car passes, the bag pulls closer and closer to drifting away. But the wind calms and the bag again droops lifelessly on its hook.

“...for their hearts were so unclear...and the truth could not appear...their spirits were divided into blinded hemispheres...”

Nothing around looks familiar. All the businesses are the same ones on street corners and in strip malls everywhere. Drug store, grocery store, gas station, and fast food. I’ve been to, through, and all around Escondido, yet I can’t tell where I am. Sweat drips down my back and pools just above my short line before soaking into my already wet shorts.

“...then all at once the chaos ceased...a stillness fell, a sudden peace...the warriors felt my silent cry...and stayed their struggle, mystified...”

I merge into the right lane and look for a place to turn around. Just as traffic moves fast enough to create a breeze, there’s another red light. I can’t take it. How do people live here? It’s already hot, and then we add cement, asphalt, and exhaust.

“...looking down from olympus...on a world of doubt and fear...its surface splintered...into sorry hemispheres...”
The apartment building on this block is a sad example. All the windows are open, and many residents have fans set in their front windows drawing in air. Drawing in this air. I don’t know what’s worse. No outside air. Or this air. But then again, I want air moving through the truck; so, I guess air in motion is better than stagnant air, even if it smells of car exhaust and smoldering asphalt.
the trough

I turn in and park.

“...we can walk our road together...if our goals are all the same...we can run alone and free...if we pursue a different aim...let the truth of love be lighted...let the love of truth shine clear...sensibility...armed with sense and liberty...with the heart and mind united...in a single...perfect...sphere...”

The bar consists of one large open room, which is dingy, and smells of soured beer. The walls are painted black and in the corners where the ceiling meets the walls, cobwebs have caught the smoke settling and are drooping with the weight. Neon signs hung on all the walls provide most of the light, and each window is bordered by sunlight trying to creep in under the black shades pulled tight against the windowsills.

There are only a couple people around, but their faces look toxic. Dry and cracking skin. Faces pulled down. Not frowning. Just pulled down. Like gravity is winning and has reversed their smiles.

Covering the floor is a spongy carpet. It seems moist, and feels like I’m walking on flattened marshmallow. The front of the long bar is lined with steel barstools and the black vinyl tacked onto the top of them is cracked and the cushioning is spilling out. The video poker machines tucked in the far corner occasionally sound off, and their flashing colors add to the lighting. When the machines sound, they push the slide guitar and crooning of Bonnie Raitt further into the background.
“...he's tried for years to work it out...at the grill and at his home...well he talks to his friends, talks to himself...he talks the chicken right off the bone...”

Two young men, who don’t look eighteen much less twenty-one, are drinking beer and shooting pool on the lone table in the middle of the bar. And there are two patrons belly up at the bar: an older man and an older woman, both look in their late sixties or early seventies. They are sitting on the far sides of the bar.

The bartender is about the same age and is leaning on the bar and talking to the man. She’s smoking a long thin cigarette and sipping on what looks like watered-down bourbon or whiskey. As I pull up a stool at the bar, they stop talking and turn.

“What can we do for you?” the bartender asks.

“Shot of Hornitos and a Heineken,” I say, pointing to the bottle of tequila on the back bar.

“Bottle Ok?”

“Yeah.”

“You need a lime with that shot?”

“Nope.”

She puts a shot glass in front of me and fills it to the rim. “You want a menu?” she asks and places the beer in front of me.
“No thanx.”

“No thanx.”

“Ok hun, my name’s Manie. You gimme a holler if ya need somethin’ else k,” she says, coughs into her hand, and returns to her conversation.

I take a breath and after a moment of hesitation I breathe out. I want to chat with these people, but I don’t. Not anymore. Something holds me back. I don’t know what, but I know I used to speak whenever, probably too often. I didn’t care what people thought. Those were the days. I didn’t give a fuck. In the middle of any bar on a good night, I’d stand up on the stool and start flapping about something that I was into at that time. Bantering about the jukebox or some girl I thought was a flake. Telling stories. Asking questions. Loud enough to make those within ears-reach think about what I was saying. But it never got me anywhere except into loud, and many times, hostile arguments or a fight. Tact. Not likely. And swabbing the floor of a bar with the back of my shirt was never enjoyable. Shit, in the South a question like “Do you understand what I’m saying?” was an invitation for a fight. I might well have said something about the boy’s mother. And hell most of the time it was before I even had a chance to get drunk.

I take a long drink from the beer. The cold liquid drains into my body and cools my feet. I put the beer on the bar and down the tequila. The crash of a hard break on the pool table fills the air. The kid who broke holds his stick high and prods his buddy to acknowledge his feat as he aims to take another shot. His pal is less than thrilled and coils onto a barstool tucked in the corner to drink his beer and watch.

“Hey Manie. You sell bottles to go, right?” I inquire.
“You got it, sweetie. We a package store too.”

“I’ll take another beer and a bottle of Hornitos to go.”

“‘K.”

Manie sets another beer in front of me and turns for the bottle. The door swings open. The breach allows sunlight into the room, illuminating the smoke lingering in the air. As the air from outside comes in, the smoke is caught and swirls in the current. A man comes stumbling through the door. What’s left of his hair stands up hanging onto his head in no apparent order. He’s barely able to keep himself upright and has a dark piss stain down the front of his pants that he holds up with one of his hands. As he comes closer, I can see his reddish swollen nose and yellowing eyes.

“Oh no,” gasps Manie.

“What?” her friend turns to see. “Shit, not Phil again.”

“Phil, we ain’t servin’ you no more. You know that,” Manie yells.

Manie places the bottle of tequila in front of me, and I put two twenties on the bar. She picks up the money and turns to the other side of the bar, opens a drawer under the glass rack, tosses the money in, and puts my change on the bar.

“Phil! I told you we ain’t servin’ you no more. Go home.”

“I didn’t come here, and I ain’t leavin’. You can kiss my ass is all you are, and I’m just the guy who can do it,” the man manages to slur out, as the weight of his hand in the air makes him waver on his feet, and the smell of vomit swims through the air toward me.
“Thanks sugar,” Manie says to me picking up the tip. “You don’t mind ol’ Phil ‘k.”

“No worries.”

I down the rest of my beer, pick up the tequila, and venture out the door. Outside in the parking lot, the heat is wavering off the asphalt. Although I’m back into the stifling heat, it’s a relief from the atmosphere of the bar. Yeah I got a drink, but I think I picked the wrong spot. How do people stand the air in such a place? I wasn’t in there for that long, and my shirt already reeks of cigarette smoke. I toss it in the back of the truck and look out to the road. The light at the nearby intersection is red, but not many cars are waiting. The waves of heat are even more noticeable where the two roads cross and remind me of times when I watched my dad cook on the grill on summer evenings. I squint behind the shade of my sunglasses as my eyes readjust.

Before I start the truck, I pick through the tapes again. Some jams are sounding good, so I put in a mix tape of live recordings from different jam bands that I downloaded.

The heavy bass and funky-jazzed-out-rhythm of “Uninvisible” by Medeski, Martin and Wood cracks the silence. I stash the tequila under the seat and turn left onto Valley Parkway heading back the way I came.
wrong but left right

South on the S6 didn’t work. A left out of the bar takes me back the way I came.

Back into traffic. Back to the red lights. Back past the plastic bag dancing on the fence. Back past the bulldozers and heavy equipment trying not to slide down the mountain. Back up the grade. Back through downtown Valley Center.

At the intersection where I made the wrong turn, there are just as many realty signs pointing in this direction. Divide. Sub-divide. Residential. Commercial. Expand. Land. Homes. Condos. The world’s for sale out here! Come one, come all.

But this specific area is a bit behind the boom. It’s a little further away from Escondido. A little further away from the freeways. A little further east. A little closer to the desert. A little hotter. A lot drier. So not as much land has been cleared, fewer cement slabs have been poured, and fewer skeleton homes are standing. But on almost every crossroad there’s a realty office. I guess they have to sell the land first before they can shave the tops of the hills for home sites. The wall of people keeps pushing east. How long will it be before San Diego meets Phoenix?

I just left the bar and now have to piss again. I even thought about it before leaving the bar, but that damn drunk threw me off. I pull off and venture into the chaparral.

The shrubs and patches of ground are much greener than I thought. I kneel down next to a small scrub oak sapling, and with the moist tips of my thumb and index finger, I wipe the dust from a leaf exposing the dark green underneath. All over
the hillside, the larger plants and small trees look burnt. Some seem charred by the sun and others by wildfires that swept through in the past. Charred bits of bark still cling to the larger shrubs, but they stand strong. They’ve survived, and the wind has spread their seeds through the rolling hills and valleys. Around and beneath them, the ground cover and the smaller, younger shrubs haven’t experienced a wildfire yet.

From afar the plants in the chaparral look the same. Some of the clumps show a greenish hue, but for the most part, they all look dry and brown. But up close, they are a deep green. Throughout the dry season, the dust blowing in the wind must settle on the leaves, and since the dust is the same color as the surrounding ground, it makes all the plants appear dry or dead. After a hard rain the chaparral looks like a different place. With all the dust washed off, the hillside comes to life, showing off the lush greens of the plants. But no rain has fallen in many months, and the chaparral and surrounding trees are dry and brittle. The green beneath the dust makes me appreciate the resilience of such plants.

With each of my steps down the small hill, a cloud of dust puffs into the air. How long did it take for the plant life to adapt to this waterless terrain? They must collect condensation as the cool mornings fade into the long hot days because the ground doesn’t seem to provide much moisture.

While walking back to the road, I catch a shadow out of the corner of my eye, passing over the ground. I look up and see a red-tailed hawk hovering above the road. The bird isn’t flapping its wings. It’s gliding, holding its position against the winds channeled by the trees and mountains along the road. I stop to watch. Suddenly, the
bird cocks its wings, banks to the right, and shoots across the road. The hawk heads
directly toward a huge jacaranda tree and lowers its tail. The red feathers shine
brilliantly in the afternoon light. It slows, and in an instant, disappears into the thick
green at the top of the tree.

The chaparral on both sides of the road is the same. The farther I get from the
coast, the less variety in plant life. The lush ground covers and short grasses are no
longer supported by imported water. They are no longer welcomed. Development
 hasn’t brought the resources yet, and they can’t exist alone.

VALLEY VIEW
CASINO
7 MINUTES
AHEAD

Parts of the chaparral are still dense with short shrubs, wild oats, and grasses
closer to the road and sticking out of the drainage ditches. Some shrubs stand tall in
sparse clumps, and bright blooms of the yucca and agave spikes jut high in the air and
can be seen from afar as bees and other insects circle the flowers. But for the most
part the plant life is thinning and between shrubs and dead wood is only grey
powdery dirt, so dry it looks as if wind alone could dig a hole in the Earth.

Now that I’m relieved, the taste of beer returns to my mind, and my dry mouth
beckons, so a few miles down the road, I pull into a convenience store to pick some
up. The store is small but packed with goods. It’s the only store for miles and shares
the building with a realty office. I’ve seen signs for the reservations ahead but have
yet to cross onto Indian land, and since there is little else out here, this store must
supply the reservation with convenience. On the shelves is everything from candyars and chips to powdered laundry soap and diapers. I walk past it all to the cooler in
the back. The beer section is longer than the rest of the cooler and packed full, but the
selection is poor. I pull out a six-pack of Coors tall boys and walk up to the counter.

“That’ll be seven seventy-six,” the clerk says.

“Oh and I don’t need a bag. I got one,” I say as I reach into my pocket for
money.

I put seven dollars on the counter, and as I’m counting out seventy-six cents,
the clerk puts the beer in a brown paper bag.

“I told you man, I have a bag,” I say and place the naked six-pack back on the
counter.

“Well we gotta see it bagged up before you leave.”

“I told you I have a bag. I’m trying to pay you before I get the bag.”

I hand him the change, and as he is counting it out and dropping it in the
drawer, his little helper comes up from behind and before I know it, the kid picks up
the beer, puts it in another bag, and sets it down next to the bag I just took the beer
out of.

“I told you guys, I’ve got a bag. I don’t need a bag. I don’t want a bag. I’ve
got a bag.”

“Well how many people you think come in here with a bag?” the clerk says.

“More should,” I bark and transfer the beer into the bag from my pocket.

“You need some manners, boy.”
“Manners. Fuck you, man. How’s that for manners,” as the door swings shut behind me.

What the hell is wrong with people? I’m trying to do the right thing. Why don’t they get it? I had to just about fight to get out of the store without them giving me a bag. Don’t they know it saves money? What nerve. Bo and Luke Duke’s short skinny cousin with his yellow STIHL hat all curved in the front, folded up like a true fuckin’ red neck. I told the motherfucker I had a bag. Why couldn’t he listen? It’s stupid to require a bag anyway, and plus why should he care? He gets paid minimum wage to sell me beer not to hassle me because I don’t want a bag. Prick. And I don’t think covering a beer label is going to keep any underage kids from drinking. I crack a beer and squeal my tires as I pull out of the parking lot. A few swigs off the beer and a couple miles down the road—all is forgotten.

WWW.WATERLOCATING.COM
WATER WELL
LOCATORS

Now that’s a business. With the lack of water in this area, I can see such a business prosper. But is their work guaranteed? If a family of four pumps all their water from the resources underground and uses the well to water crops and the yard, will it last? Groundwater is a finite resource. What if multiple families tap the same well? They’ll all be screwed when the taps run dry. How many homes can the ground water sustain? And what happens if the well becomes contaminated? In Silent Spring, Rachel Carson writes:
This groundwater is always on the move, sometimes at a pace so slow that it travels no more than 50 feet a year, sometimes rapidly, by comparison, so that it moves nearly a tenth of a mile in a day. It travels by unseen waterways until here and there it comes to the surface as a spring, or perhaps it is tapped to feed a well. But mostly it contributes to streams directly as rain or surface runoff, all the running water of the earth’s surface was at one time groundwater. And so, in a very real and frightening sense, pollution of the groundwater is pollution of water everywhere. (47)

The chaparral and tree-lined road gives way to an open stretch of land. It’s like I just drove out of a tunnel. The sides of the foothills are no longer close to the road and with no more trees to block the view, a long and wide flat expanse of land opens. The distant mountains like walls in all directions, and the flat land between resembles a small prairie or savannah. The land is covered with dry grass that is shorter on some pieces of property than on others. The scattered homes look quaint but are hard to see in detail because they are quite far away and surrounded by trees. I’m sure the winds can get strong, especially during Santa Ana conditions, and the trees create a wind-block and shade. The trees are mainly tall branching shade trees, but the dark green spears of a few junipers stick out above the others.

Palomar Mountain, the highest peak in this chain, looms in the distance, growing as I approach. 6,000 feet isn’t tall as far as mountains go, but sea level is so close it makes the mountain a giant. Boulders cascade down the face of the smaller
peak just to the west of the highest part of the mountain. Some of the rounded sides of the larger boulders seem to rise beyond vertical, and look like a rock climber’s dream, but inaccessible to the untrained climber, a sharp contrast to the mellow green slopes leading to the higher peaks of Palomar.

As I come to the far side of the flatland, the road begins to descend, and I realize that what I thought was the bottom of the valley is more of an elevated plateau. The road passes through a short area of oak trees and then rapidly descends. I watch as the mountains grow before me. Back a couple of miles, I was sure I was at sea level or even lower. The mountains all around gave me the impression that I was driving through the lowest part of the valley, but it was just an illusion.

The road hugs the side of what I now know is a mountain as it winds down, and off the side is a sheer cliff dropping straight down into a deep gorge and the Earth is changing to a deep rusty orange color.

HELLHOLE CANYON PRESERVE

On Old Castle Road the interconnected valleys meandered between the foothills. At the bottom of certain hills, shrubs and trees were lush with new growth. Some of the hills dropping into the valleys were steeper than others and made me wonder if they were valleys or canyons. It seems most people use the two words interchangeably. For a while, I thought that valleys ran north to south and canyons ran east to west, but I was never sure. Now, as I descend into Hellhole Canyon, I know
the difference. The canyon is desolate. Uninviting. And it seems even the plants agree and have barely set root on the steep walls. The wall off the side of the road is so steep I can’t see where it leads. It just drops off.

The extreme terrain must make it a canyon. The difference needs an example. A picture. All the slopes of the surrounding foothills are almost vertical and the vegetation from the top to the bottom is even sparser and more barren than anything I’ve seen this far. To climb the walls would require ropes, clamps, and knowledge I do not possess. It seems the less water the rougher the terrain. I can see the wall up to my left and off to the distant canyon floor, but I have to assume the middle section is the same because the sheer sides hide it from my view.

The road crew who laid this stretch of highway wasn’t able to search out and find easily accessible flat areas. They had to come first with heavy equipment and cut a giant groove, a man-made gorge into the side of the mountain. It’s like an elongated step that winds along and around the sides of the hills, and cut deep into the wall are grooves from the machines marking where they scraped the hillside. At certain places and attached to the vertical walls is wire mesh, which is an attempt to keep the rocks and wall from tumbling onto the road. I say attempt because the way the side of the mountain rises, I don’t see how the mesh helps. There are no guardrails, and I can only imagine if I blew a tire or made a mistake. I’d find myself one thousand feet down a matter of seconds.

ENTERING RINCON
INDIAN
RESERVATION
The way it’s built, the road looks like a man-made canyon. The pavement is the river and has over time eaten the land away. And now I’m driving through the canyon, looking up at the sheer sides. And as the road descends further, there are places where there’s a wall on both sides. It’s like a tunnel without a top. A channel through the mountain. It’s a window into time. Where the road was cut into the mountain, I can see the striations of time. The dark reds of the clay alternate with crumbling rock and sand. Each layer is slightly different from the one below and the one above. A timeline, like inorganic tree rings of a mountain. Some are thick and dense and others are thin and seem to have been eaten away by the wind and rain. The deeper, denser layers show wisdom. They hold on as years weigh heavy on top, not allowing the wind and rain to take them away. At some places where the channel bends, a stucco type material colored to look natural and sprayed on the walls covers the layers of time.

I know the spray has a function, but how much does it help? I’m sure it keeps small pieces of the mountain from snarling traffic, but considering the five hundred feet of rock above the wall, it seems futile. If rocks decide to break free, they will bring the entire hillside with them, and the debris will fill this channel in a flash.

Out into the flats of the canyon floor are only a couple dwellings. I can’t tell if they are used strictly for working the land or are permanent homes. The lack of settlement emphasizes the harsh terrain and climate. There is one large ranch in the middle surrounded by long lines of fencing that divide different sections of the land.
Even though there is no trace of water, the canyon was cut by water at some point, but that is the only memory. No water. No trees, except for those planted around the buildings. No people. No animals. There are signs of ranchland, but they're void of cattle. Just nothingness. A canyon. Like it should be. Desolate.

The reservation contains more of the same, more of the nothing. Like a step back in time. Back 100 hundred years in time in just ten miles. The Indians don't roam the hillsides anymore, and I don't see any teepees like in the movies, but somehow it feels real. Empty like it once was. The road no longer descends and up ahead is a stoplight. The only one I've seen since Valley Center. And, of course, it's red. No cars around, yet it's still red.

**HARRAH’S**
RINCON CASINO AND RESORT

The giant neon sign below the header tells me of the events this week.
“Showgirls...Showgirls...Showgirls...Tickets as low as $10...inquire within...”

Behind is the hotel and casino. It’s not a giant casino, but it looks nice and new. After the light changes, I pass the parking as it sprawls out in front, wraps around the back, and extends up to the hillside. It looks like a Las Vegas hotel came to the reservation and gave birth to a little one. It’s the same plan just smaller, and I’m sure you have to pass all the way through the casino to gain access to the hotel elevators. The parking lot is almost full and it takes me a moment to remember that it’s Monday. No wonder
there aren't any cars on the road. Everyone had to get here early to make sure they got a parking space. And there’s nobody walking around either. The streets are empty. It must be that everyone out here is either a gambling tourist or working at the casino. Shit, at least they have jobs. And what a great idea—gambling to keep people off the streets.

Now that I’ve passed the modern gambling facility all lit up with its neon façade, I guess it’s not a step back in time, rather a jump forward. The Indians skipped a whole slew of steps. They went from nomads, roaming the hills hunting and gathering straight to gambling, capitalizing on the capitalists themselves. They never got around to developing the hillsides and creating a bustling economy. Sweet fuckin’ irony if I’ve ever seen it. Now they are taking something back. It’s not land. But money can buy land. I wonder if that’s their master plan. Wouldn’t that serve the server? Wouldn’t that be great? Now I’m sounding like a beer commercial, but I don’t care.

“Cheers,” I say holding up my beer as I pass.

I want to see this happen. Not because I think it is right. Not because I want to change the past. No. I want to see it happen because it just may make some people think. A small privilege. It’s reservation land you know. A different country in many ways. With different laws. So gambling is legal. Yeah, they still pay taxes, but look at Las Vegas. I don’t think the casino owners in Las Vegas give a fuck about kicking a little the government’s way to keep them happy. And now they are rich beyond belief. Bugsy Siegel and the Flamingo Hotel. Revolutionary. Indian freedom fighter. Who
thought it would go this far? So in exchange for a little tax money, the Indians are
taking money from outsiders who visit their casinos. And I’d say lots of it. Hell, I’ve
never won. But who’s in there gambling at this time on a Monday? Well from looking
around at the residences on the reservation, it sure isn’t Indians because they would
all have to drive two, three, even ten cars each to fill the parking lots. And it’s
Monday. I can only imagine this place on Friday and Saturday night. I want to watch
this scenario unfold like the chaparral behind the casino blossoms after the winter’s
rain fades and the spring shines down from the sky. Inevitable cycles.

I pull up to a stop sign and see that the S6 Ts. The cross roads haven’t inspired
much commerce and that means I’m heading in the right direction. Away. The
problem is I never saw a sign indicating direction. I somewhat know the area, and I
assume this is highway 76 because there aren’t other roads out here, but my guesses
haven’t been that good today. My last right took me the wrong way and just when I
thought I was in the bottom of the valley, I descended deeper than I thought possible.
But what can I do? It was my idea to wander along the back roads and try to stay off
the freeways and away from gridlock.

On the corner is a fruit stand and between the stand and the road is a wide dirt
space, so I turn and loop around the stop sign to pause and get my sense of direction.
In front of the fruit stand are a couple of picnic tables and an old metal barrel of some
sort. It looks like a trashcan, so I grab the empty beer can from the passenger’s side
floorboard and toss it in the bin. I crack open another tall boy and use the stop to
stretch out my legs.
The sun is off to my left, so a left will take me back to the coast. I’m still curious if I missed the sign or if there wasn’t one. It would be strange if there weren’t a sign because on all the interstate highways in California, intentionally designed as straight expressways connecting distant cities with no turns for miles, there is a sign every mile. They give you a countdown until your exit. San Diego 50, San Diego 25, San Diego 17, San Diego 12, San Diego 8, San Diego 5, San Diego downtown next 12 exits.

Out here in the rural areas and in the windy mountains, I would figure Caltrans would make certain the roads are labeled, so unsuspecting tourists don’t get lost. I haven’t seen many signs for roads much less cities. Casinos yes, but not cities. I guess a road with few signs is in a sense beautiful, and I’m sure the people who use these roads live here and don’t need the signs anyway, which would certainly explain why there are almost no cars on the road. An indefinite route is what I wanted, and I got it. My idea was to avoid getting frustrated with all the bullshit trashy highways and idiots in a hurry, but is the plan backfiring? Because I also planned on getting out of town as fast as I could, but my choices haven’t helped. “I don’t need a map. I know where I’m going.”

Then again I haven’t really been lost. And now I know what to expect. I know it may take a little longer. The road may be in poor condition and wind me around in circles, but the lack of other vehicles is definitely a treat. And now that I think about it, I haven’t seen any pissed-off drivers since the city. I hope it’s because they are enjoying the rural landscape and empty roads.
I loop back around the stop sign and turn away from the sun. The road has a slight incline and seems to be leading into the mountains. Success. Up ahead is citrus grove leading off deep into the hills and then immediately after a palm tree farm. It looks like it is the same place. Strange combination.

LAKE HENSHAW  15
PALOMAR MOUNTAIN  16
JULIAN  33

The grade of the road slowly increases and doesn’t allow me to shift past third gear. It leads up for awhile and then flattens out, drops down a little and then goes back up. Following the rolling foothills, the road continues to randomly switch between up and down and back and forth and wide turns and sharp turns. It’s kind of like a roller coaster without the safety measures.

As the landscape remains desolate, and I no longer pass through areas of development, I’m beginning to feel more at ease. And since there are no cars to compete with or drivers to get mad at, the challenge becomes the road itself. I start playing with the road like it’s a game board. The extended instrumental jams on the tape are perfect for the game. The live improvisation and dynamic changes accentuate the grade increases and curves in the road. I just drift off into the music and keep my foot to the floor. The faster and louder they play, the faster I go.

ENTERING
LA JOLLA
INDIAN
RESERVATION
I grip the wheel with both hands, tight but loose at the same time and let the banks of the road guide the tires. I keep my speed up through the turns, shifting between second and third and keeping the RPMs as high as possible. Faster and faster each time, I see how far I can push it without sliding or squealing the tires. Making one lane from two. All four tires over the double yellow. Time and again. The road seems much straighter when I use both lanes.
a collection of passing thoughts

A maze. All roads lead to the same place. Where’s that? And what’s the fine print—you may never get there? Will this road finally lead me away? At this point, all signs point in the right direction. I know where I’m going. I know how to get there. Still don’t know what I’ll do, but that’s the point. Why am I out here anyway? It’s interesting, the farther I get from my house, the farther I get from the city, the farther I get from my life and my responsibilities, the cloudier my head feels but my thoughts flow faster. Fuck, I don’t even have a job. What will I do for money this time? No way to avoid the inevitable. Will I settle for another dead-end job, complete with a corporate asshole lording over everyone? Or will I go back to school? Why do I always have problems at work? Why can’t people take criticism?

It’s funny to me that I’m just learning certain things that most people have known for years. And at the same time, they don’t know things that I consider second nature. I know my world. I know it is any size I make it. And by living my life the way I choose, I create the boundaries by which I live or break down the boundaries that support antiquated thought. Free thought. Experimentation. If individuals didn’t continually question power and authority then the Sun would still revolve around the Earth, and I’d still live in Europe because I wouldn’t want to fall off the edge of the world.

To me, this is simple. But just as the people I work with don’t understand this concept, I can’t deal with them not understanding and communication breaks down.
With me, as usual, it's different. I was on the road for so long that things like intimate, truly intimate, conversation, not necessarily with loved ones, just everyday people, simply for the fact that you interact with them on a regular basis, by choice or not, was scarce at best. Work, school, and any long-term relationships were gone. I still had friends, but they were so far away that intimacy was impossible. And since I was always leaving, relationships, conversation, and time became transitory. I was always moving, faces were always changing, so it mattered much less how I treated people, not friends, just people. There was never time to discuss actions, good or bad, in depth because just as things happened and warranted discussion, I was gone. I effortlessly passed in and out of people's lives with little or no effect. I was living a dream. I was a ghost.

And the lifestyle changed me. Intimacy waned, and nothing mattered except the waves. Endless, nameless streets passed in a shroud of darkness. I lost touch and passed through life as if I were never there in the first place. I became selfish. I came first. Always.

So now I have a bad attitude. I'm no longer passing through people's lives. I now affect and, good or bad, I hear about it. Time is once again relevant, and what I do affects those around me whether I intend to or not. I'm sure my actions mattered at some point and were the topic of conversation, but I wasn't there to listen. Affect is undeniable and unavoidable. So interaction, even if it's just idle chatter, does matter. And the poor handling of situations and the poor treatment of others comes back on me, as it should. I'm beginning to realize that just as I will always question authority,
the authority needing to be questioned is, at times, my own.

Just as I’m realizing my faults in the work place, it’s equally important for those around me to try and understand my side, but this never happens. Maybe they need to spend less time working to buy crap at the mall and take a few moments to get out into the elements and think. Not all the time because all the wild places would get too crowded, but an occasional stint into the self and away from the rat race would do them some good.

The road curves hard to the right and the grade dramatically increases. I slam it second and floor it. With the momentum and the low gear, I don’t lose speed, but if I had a tachometer, I’m sure it would be redlining.

CAUTION

20

MPH

The speedometer reads 45, so I disregard the warning. I haven’t seen another car up the whole grade and continue using both lanes. I no longer have tailgaters, not even anyone approaching from afar. What has changed? On the road heading into Escondido, I couldn’t drive fast enough. Now nobody can keep up. The drivers out here must be different. I’ve finally found nothing, just a road. No cars. No people. No homes. No casinos. No businesses. No signs. Nothing leading me nowhere. I no longer feel pressed for time, always having to be somewhere. On the way home is different than on the way to work. Or maybe it is just that all the commuters who have somewhere to be are already there. It would be interesting to sit on the side of
the road and watch people’s expressions change with the time of day. I’m sure the
progression would tell quite a story. Did Sally have a bad day at the office? Did Billy
get in a fight at school? I could sit on the side of the road and make up possible
scenarios all day. Oh, and I would have to count how many are on cell phones. Just
for kicks.

This little game reminds of a time not long after I’d arrived in California. I
was still washing dishes at Chart House, which wasn’t bringing in much cash, so, I
went to a temp agency and found a job assembling pool table parts in Poway. The job
put me on the 15 freeway at rush hour every morning.

On one particular morning, I woke up real early. The sun was creeping in,
slipping between the spaces in the blinds. It was much earlier than usual, and the
extra time allowed me to relax on the front porch and have a cup of coffee before
leaving. The colors in the eastern sky were mesmerizing. I felt as if I was supposed to
be sitting there watching the pink, yellow, and orange streaks breach the dark of
night.

When it was time to leave, I grabbed a coffee to go and hopped in my
thousand-dollar-Tercel. Every day was the same. I would sit in the driver’s seat, take
a deep breath, and hope the car would start. It did.

I knew only one route to the freeway, and as I turned up the freeway onramp, I
punched the gas. The little car was doing all it could to get up the hill and onto the 15.
Struggling to 40, to 45, and then maxing out at just below 50. I thought nothing of it
and started to look for a place to merge when I noticed the car behind me. A man in
his forties was behind the wheel. He was dressed to impress with his suit and tie, was driving a late model sedan, and obviously wasn’t happy about being stuck behind me. Intrigued, I watched him in my rearview mirror and was able to witness this middle-aged guy lose his fucking mind. He began to scream and flail his hands around in the air. He was absolutely raging at 6:30 in the morning. At this point, I was astonished. I was thinking, “Fuck man, what else can I do? I have the pedal to the floor.” But that wasn’t enough for him.

It doesn’t end here. He crossed the white lines of the onramp, pulled into traffic, and as he passed, he leaned over and in one motion gave me the full extent of his intellect with one finger. All of this before I had a chance to merge into traffic. I thought about it the rest of the way to work. I was blown away. It was as if the guy wanted to say, “You stole twenty seconds of my day, and I want them back.” Was the man venting because his wife was cheating on him? Was he late for work? I wondered how he would have responded if I explained that my car was all I could afford and couldn’t go any faster. But rationality was not on this guy’s mind. He didn’t fucking care about anything but himself. What a nightmare of confusion big cities create. Such pressure. Such anger. Needless to say the assembly line job didn’t last very long, and I happily left the life of the commuter.

The road continues to wind up the mountain, but the closer I get to the top the grade lessens. I no longer have to use both lanes, and my game is over. The grade rose so fast that it brought me rapidly into a different ecosystem. The chaparral blends with live oak and then the dry short shrubs give way to dense Oak Woodland. The
road flattens out, I’m finally able to shift to a higher gear, and as the engine noise fades, the music cuts back through.

The live oaks fill an area that slopes down into the valley of the San Luis Rey River. I can’t see any water, but the lush green leaves of the woodland indicate there is a consistent water source nearby. The dense forest fades higher up on the slope and then pine trees line the tops.

ENTERING
CLEVELAND
NATIONAL
FOREST

Now I see why there are no homes or development around here. I was beginning to wonder because the woodland seems to be a perfect place to build a home. The shade and water help keep the temperature down, and the view is gorgeous. I’m glad it’s protected.

I pass a wide clearing, and where the trees have been cut, overgrown, dried oats and grasses have taken over. The same plants grow along the road and under the trees, but they thrive in the cleared area. The sun beats down for longer hours and provides more growing time. At the back of the clearing is an old dilapidated structure. It looks like an old home or field house and barely hangs onto the small hill underneath.

RESPECT OUR CULTURE
USE TOBACCO IN A SACRED WAY
How strange. I’m unsure if I’m on reservation land or national forest. But it doesn’t matter. Anyway to keep this area pristine is fine with me. Without regulations, all the trees would be traded for driveways and home sites. As time moves on and population continues to increase, places like this are becoming a thing of the past. The ideology that man is in control of nature has taken over. Conquer or be conquered. What bullshit. What will it take to make people realize the harmony that is necessary for both to exist? It seems that the simplest things are always the first forgotten.

In surfing, I learned to ride whitewater before I learned to ride waves, as most people who learn to surf have to do first. Simple. Riding whitewater is easier and safer. But now I can’t catch whitewater. It’s like I forgot how. A wave will crash in front of me and when I try to take off—splash. The first thing I learned, I’ve now forgotten. And Dad always said bring a map.

Do people need a cloud to notice the beauty of a clear blue sky? It seems people get so caught up in the everyday that they forget. They forget about others. They forget about the world. Shit, look at the obesity rates in the United States. They forget about themselves.

I think many simple and practical ideas have been lost to time.

How about Newton’s third law of physics. “For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.” As the intensity of the action increases, so does the reaction. Why can’t people apply such laws to the issues of development? What reaction will nature have to devastation of the environment? Just as a clear blue sky needs a little
puffy white spot for people to realize there are no clouds, will it take ultimate loss to wake people up or do they just need a patch of untouched serene forest in the middle of the city to help them see? Do people understand the importance of New York’s Central Park? Or would it be better to place a high-rise building in the middle of Zion National Park, so those who visit could see the surrounding beauty and understand its importance?

How about Barry Commoner’s first law of ecology. “Everything is connected to everything else.” So the oceans are connected to the land, the land is connected to the sky, the sky is connected to space, air is connected to water, and life is connected to death. So what happens when humans are disconnected from nature? If we take that little cloud away is the sky gone?

How about Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis. “Mother Earth is a complex entity involving the Earth’s biosphere, atmosphere, oceans, and soil; the totality constituting a feedback or cybernetic system which seeks an optimal physical and chemical environment for life on this planet.” The Earth depends homeostasis. I don’t mean to make to fun of Mr. Lovelock, but is he making what Newton and Commoner said more complex? Is he trying to hide these ideas from those who won’t understand? Is he attempting to be too specific with something that can be very simple? The Earth is a complex entity, but for people to understand their relationship with the planet, it’s not a good idea to alienate them. Should we go back to the Greek’s idea of GEAE, Mother Earth? Treat the Earth as you would treat your own mother. Simple. Do we need that cloud to see the sky? Why are simple things lost to unnecessary
complexity? We believe Newton was a genius. His laws are taught in our elementary schools. But somehow people can’t see that for every reaction there is an equal and opposite reaction.

I take a swig off my beer. I forgot that it was sitting in the cup holder. It’s warm, so I finish the rest quickly and toss the can on the floor.

Do we not see the effects of our actions on the environment and on ourselves, both mentally and physically? Gridlock affects our moods. Air quality affects our health. What cloud can we use to show people that these notions still apply? Is the reaction done yet? Has the reaction equaled out or is our planet still reacting to the industrial revolution and nuclear testing? I’ve heard that some of the forests in the North Eastern United States are beginning to rebound, but what is still dying?

How about time. Simple concept. The sun rises in the morning and sets in the evening, except at the poles. The seasons turn from winter to spring and so on. Time. We need so much sleep per rotation of the Earth in order to function. You’re never on time, either you’re late or your early. An arbitrary concept developed from how the solar system works. Simple. Or is it? We add money to the equation. Time is money. No longer simple. People’s lives no longer depend on the Earth’s rotation. They depend on money. The time continuum is obsolete. The Earth rotates around money.

USE FOREST RESOURCES WISELY

Does time play into Newton’s and Commoner’s ideas. Does it create an
exponential and overlapping progression of action and reaction and connectivity? If the effects or actions of nuclear testing and industrial pollution still continue today and the Earth hasn’t finished reacting to past actions, the connected parts of Earth must be reacting to hundreds of years of actions. What if there isn’t enough time for the reactions to catch up? I still don’t see a balance though. So all these human actions are making simple things very confusing. If all these actions continue to accumulate, something will fight back.

How about cause and effect. What comes around goes around. You reap what you sow. We speak it. We understand it. We witness it happen. Then, we quickly forget. Are we brewing a global reaping? It’s frightening. Because if the human race reaps what it has sowed with its treatment of Mother Earth, as an entity, the scenario looks bleak.

How about trial and error. If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again. This seems more like what has been happening, but with trial and error the assumption is that when there is no success, adjustment or change takes place. I haven’t seen much of this, but there’s an arrogant nature about humans that doesn’t let us acknowledge error or that heavily avoided sin—failure. Humans are still divided into geopolitical factions around the world and fighting like school children. Meanwhile corporations continue to get away with murder, corruption, thievery, and inhumane actions around the world. They don’t change their actions just their locations.

All these principles and laws are things we learn, think about for a short time, take the test, and then conveniently forget. We fall back on unfounded criticism or
what “might be defined as ‘grandfather’s law’, which states that ‘things were better in the old days’. It is a fact of life that new evolutionary developments cause distress to the established order. This is so at all levels of life” (Lovelock 133-134). Progression and digression are inevitable, but this mentality doesn’t help. Or is this something new? Now we have done so much damage, even the past is not to be looked on as pristine.

Simplicity is bliss. Why do we make things so difficult? It seems the ideas of balance or harmony go back infinitely. Why aren’t they discussed more often? Why can’t we get them right? Have people really forgotten or are people in general putting a damper on the ideas? Someone always has to be right, so that always leaves someone in the wrong.

Everything is a battle. My body is battling the heat. The coastal air is battling the desert air. Children battle parents. The battles are all on different levels. Some are mental, some are physical, some are personal, and some are “just business.” What a crock. Some are national. Some are international. But when it’s all broken down, one is above the rest. Humans and Mother Earth. All the laws and principles, confusing or simple, attempt to explain this battle and its global ramifications. Disregard of this relationship affects the entire planet. We still don’t know to what extent, but there are proven effects. And I don’t care what religion, political association, or race people base their decisions on, global issues affect all. So why aren’t the ideas catching on. Why can’t we slow it down?

But are any of these ideas, concepts, or theories true? Am I just another
arrogant person thinking that they have some merit? We arbitrarily designate such theories to make our world seem simple. I think theorizing, at times, is just a way for people to try and make sense of the chaos, which the mind doesn’t deal well with. But what else can we do with all our spare time? It’s not like life is hard today. Not in the United States anyway. Or the modern, technologically advanced world for that matter. Or more specifically for the intellectuals who create new patterns and theories to explain the world. Life has become so easy that we have to develop new ways to make existence exciting, to rid ourselves of boredom. Centuries ago (today in some parts of the world), humans had to hunt, gather, fish, and use the land to survive. Now we swing by the grocery store on the way home from work, and in about a half an hour, we have enough food to feed our family for the week. So we invent problems to kill the monotony.

I’m beginning to feel that the alcohol and today’s trip are battling in my mind and the progressing frustrations aren’t helping clear anything up. Voices, time, and pictures flash into my thoughts. White noise. I get an occasional break as I drift into the melodies and rhythms of the music, but today that seems to be short lived. Instead, I drift off and forget about the sounds altogether. Mental static? I don’t know. I don’t think so. The progressions seem to have purpose, so it can’t be just noise.

It’s becoming harder to focus on the side of the road and the surroundings, so I let the thoughts roam. Interruptions are waning. The alcohol is wearing my patience thin, but as I continue to progress further toward nowhere and nothing, there is less confusion, less people, less noise...just less. Less is more. Outside wanes. Inside
expands. It allows me to float through unconnected trains of thought. Reduce. I feel like I have layers of consciousness. Like the Earth has layers of time. Access to some regions comes when I focus on something that has nothing to do with anything. Meditation I guess. I’ve tried that route, but I can never find the off button. Ohm. Om. Aum. I always get something. Maybe if I let the circuits run long enough, they’ll overload into ironic Nirvana.

If I don’t get out of this truck soon, I’m going to lose it. I want out. I’m tired of driving. David Byrne says he wants to stop traveling and wants to be somewhere. I just want to be nowhere. What do I do? Pull off? Push through until I get there? I have to be getting close. Shit, if I was smart, I would have taken the freeway, and I’d be there already. But that wasn’t an option this morning. Damn. What am I trying to do? I keep pushing to get away, but find myself caught up and frustrated again by my own doing and what I’m trying to leave behind. I need to figure it out. But what is it anyway? The thoughts won’t stop. Just as I tell myself stop, I wonder why and the cycle begins again. Circles. Circles. A maze of the mind. What do I want to do with my life? Fuck the restaurant business. That’s a nightmare. Why can’t I pull away? Why won’t it go quiet? I keep getting farther away, but my mind continues to fill the void where outside stimuli are disappearing. I’m beginning to wonder which is worse the over-stimulation from human creation or my mental rambling. And I can’t to stop either.

<<PALOMAR MOUNTAIN
ascending

Although past its highest point, the sun is still beaming high in the sky, sending strong and bright afternoon rays. Slanted shadows stretch across South Grade Road where there are trees between the edge of the mountain and the road. The day is waning and now that I’m on the mountain, a combination of shade and altitude battle the summer sun and bring some relief from the heat.

Where the road hugs the west side of the grade, it remains very hot, but since the grade is so windy, it isn’t exposed to direct sun for long. And as I continue up the grade higher and higher and deeper into the forest, shady areas become more prevalent, and although not drastic, the temperature falls.

Back in the cities and valleys, I’m sure the temperature is pushing the hundred-degree mark, and in the cement-laden downtown areas, the intense and inescapable heat is probably overbearing by now, sending people who aren’t at work on a quest for friends with pools or en route to the beach. Even though the temperature is not as harsh on the mountain as in the valleys, it isn’t as cool as it would be lying at the water’s edge with the light onshore flow bringing in the chilled air that was floating out over the ocean all night long. But that comes with a price. To enjoy the ocean’s gift during the summer, people leaving the inland valleys have to get up early, drive to the coast, search for a place to park, walk down to the beach, and hope to find enough space to relax and play in the water. And then, tired and cranky, they do the reverse when it’s time to leave, and this seems to always happen
at the very time everyone decides to leave.

SAN DIEGO
S6
COUNTY

Although the S6 has local street names throughout, it is essentially one road that begins on Palomar Mountain and ends at the coast, taking people on a roller-coaster-ride through the heart of North County. The trip is mental as well as physical. It is like a trip through time. And what a ride it would be for a first time visitor to the area.

Come one. Come all. Take a drive-thru tour of North County. We’ll begin today’s tour at the Palomar Observatory, a desolate area overlooking some of the little remaining untouched wilderness in the area. It’s a window into what much of Southern California looked like a hundred years ago. Then before we wind into Valley Center and Escondido, we’ll stop and check out the canyons and grasslands of the Indian reservations along the way, but don’t forget to bring an extra twenty to try your luck at one of the casinos, which are rapidly becoming essential stops in San Diego. Once through East County and the downtown area of Escondido, we’ll continue over interstate 15, pass Lake Hodges, and drop into Rancho Santa Fe, one of the wealthiest towns in the United States, complete with multi-acre estates that cost upwards of $20 million or more, celebrities not included. Then we’ll slip around the south side of Rancho Santa Fe and pass beneath interstate 5. Make sure to get your camera ready for Solano Beach and Del Mar, two of San Diego’s premiere
picturesque beach towns. And heck, if you fall in love with a particular area along the way, buy a house and stay—there’s plenty for sale.

What a ride it would be. In about 50 miles, the scenery changes from upper elevation oak, fir and pine woodlands to scorching hot dry grassland and chaparral to sand beaches and the bountiful Pacific. The trip may be slow and windy and more difficult to follow, but there’s a payoff. It’s like a history, climate, and an ecology lesson wrapped in one package. And the contrasts between nature and man along the way exemplify the diversity of Southern California inhabitants in about an hour.

Up ahead, the forest is becoming much denser. Some patches of pine and fir appear, but for the most part the surroundings are still oak woodland. The road is cut right into the forest, so the tree line begins directly at the edge of the road. Either by rain, snowmelt, or winds driven by passing cars, dirt at the base of the oak trees closest to the road is eaten away exposing the root systems. The naked roots seem to be reaching for the road, but are cut off or break before they have a chance to attempt a bond with the pavement.

CAUTION
SHARP CURVES
NEXT
7 MILES

Back on highway 76, I laughed at the signs warning me about speed because the danger seemed to be exaggerated, but the warnings along this road aren’t overly cautious at all. The tires of the truck want to leave the road at 25 m.p.h. I slow.
Knowing that I’m almost to a stopping place makes the slow speed enjoyable, and I’m able to watch the scenery change. The temperature now seems to have leveled off and must be in the eighties, not cool by any means, but it’s still sweet relief from the bitterness of the valley floor. The slower speed quiets the wind, and I notice that the music has stopped. This time, I turn it off for good. My thoughts waver and I think about coming up here with my parents when they visited. We didn’t do any hiking that day, but we spent some time at the observatory.

I remember wandering around and being mesmerized by the photos on the walls. It amazes me when astronomers explain how they can look back in time. In school, we use books and film to study the past. We are confined to view history through the eyes and interpretations of those who came before us, but through calculations of how light travels and powerful telescopes, astronomers are able to actually view things that happened eons ago.

But the thing that truly caught my attention that day wasn’t any photo on the wall. It was a poster outlining the issues of light pollution and its detrimental effects on the astronomer’s ability to view the cosmos. The poster showed aerial images of San Diego around 1948 when the telescope was first used next to more recent images. Areas of extreme light pollution were contrasted against the images from 50 years ago. Light, a necessity for life, a blessing, is, to these scientists, a nightmare, a hindrance to their life’s work. And the irony is that scientists, just like them, are to blame.

Daylight hours were never long enough so we fixed the problem. First by
candlelight, and then through a series of discoveries, the double-edged sword of 24-hour daylight was born. An enigma for centuries, electric current intrigued intellects from Greeks times in B.C. to 19th century inventors. Luigi Galvani, Alessandro Volta, Benjamin Franklin, Michael Faraday, Joseph Swan, and Thomas Edison all contributed to lighting the world in the 18th and 19th centuries, eventually leading to the discovery of a direct current generator that soon after lit the streets of New York.

The progress of the modern world owes much to the discovery and development of electricity, but the side effects of such activities are painfully obvious when looking to the stars. In, near, or even on the outskirts of large metropolitan areas, there are no stars. Well they’re always shining, but very few are visible. The light emanating from the cities shadows the darkness needed to see the stars. And as the future becomes the past, the concept of time depends less and less every year on cosmic rotations and orbits. And places to see the stars are becoming more and more difficult to find. Light pollution is spreading globally.

So the problem of not having enough daylight hours was solved long ago, but has caused another problem. Blocking out the stars isn’t immediately dangerous, but what effects does it have? Seeing the stars keeps people in check. It stomps on some of their egocentricism and presents a new perspective. To talk about the stars helps people see that there is something more out there, something beyond their world. And whether it’s beyond their front yard, beyond their country, or beyond the tip of their nose, just the idea brings a new point of view. Maybe it will slow them down for an instant, and their significance in the universe will surface, which I hate to say is of
You’ve got to quit your little charade and join the freak parade now that your road has been paved from conception to your grave. Enormous things to do, others practices to eschew, to be better than you is impossible to do, but the world won’t stop without you. No the world won’t stop without you. Your achievements are unsurpassed, you are highly-ordered mass, but you can bet you ass your free energy will dissipate. Two billion years thus far, now mister here you are, an element in a sea of enthalpic organic compounds. The world won’t stop without you. The world won’t stop without you. You’re only as elegant as your actions let you be a piece of chaos related phylogenetically to every living organ system, they’re siblings. don’t you see? The world rotates and will revolve without you constantly. Two billion years thus far, now mister here you are, an element in a sea of enthalpic organic compounds. The world won’t stop without you. No, the world won’t stop without you.” (Bad Religion).

“I said the world won’t stop without you,” the chorus boils from deep within, and I expel it into the wind and point west toward the city.

“The world won’t stop without you.”

Time doesn’t depend on man’s invention and certainly doesn’t depend on Joe Bossman tapping his watch when John Nobody arrives to work ten minutes late after being stuck in traffic. Time is just an arbitrary label. We can use it or abuse it as we
see fit. Yes, the world won’t stop without you. Or me for that matter. But to see the force beyond time, people need to stop their personal clocks, take a long slow look around and revisit the world.

The thought takes me back a night recently when I went to a concert at the Belly Up Tavern in Solana Beach. The band performing was Sound Tribe Sector Nine. They don’t conform to ordinary rock instruments. Instead they use both standard instrumentation like guitars, keyboards, bass, percussion and drums, and also cutting edge music technology like iMac laptops and MIDI (musical instrument digital interface). The blend places two extremely different factions of the music community against one another, specifically those who think using laptop computers and MIDI is blasphemy and those who think such technology is progress. Individuals who are against technology in music contend that electronic music lacks soul and talent. And many times I agree, but these guys are different. They have mastered the ability to mix and utilize both schools of thought and create an atmospheric and meditative sound.

At intermission I found my friends off to one side of the stage by the bar and told them that I enjoyed the first set and found the band to be unique and modern. But to my shock, the general consensus was the band was slow and boring, even though earlier in the evening I warned them to keep an open mind. Patience. Slow down and watch. But everyone wanted Rock n’ Roll. They wanted loud, fast-paced music.

I don’t understand. It think it’s amazing for the band to require so much patience and take their time to expose the meditative and collectively wavering
frequencies of sound. It was new. Modern. Unique. I know they play at entertainment venues, but that is not their ultimate goal.

The stage was covered with huge crystals and accompanying the music was an artist painting and airbrushing improvised art inspired by the music. The band’s intentions are different than a standard rock band. They want their audience to see, to slow down, and to quiet the mind and listen. I think it is an attempt to help cut out all the everyday noise and regain mental focus. But again, they are boring. Is it that we’ve now become so accustomed to the pace of our modern creation that we can’t slow down and listen? Truly listen.

This seems to be a similar scenario as commuters going to work and regular people I interact with, even friends, never understanding where I’m coming from. They are all in a hurry to satisfy their own expectations. And this just isn’t always going to happen. Flexibility and fluidity. So I went to the show to see what Sound Tribe was going to do and didn’t go just for entertainment. I went to support them as well. I guess I believe it’s a collective experience. Everything is connected to everything else.

So I know that Sound Tribe is into spiritual enlightenment and mystic exploration, and I let my friends know this, yet they didn’t alter their expectations for the evening. They still came and expected straight entertainment. Television. They wanted fast-paced Rock n’ Roll that sends energy in one direction. Out. And fills all the senses so full that just to keep up the mind is spent. No room to think. They just continue right along with the pace of the modern world. Drive-thru egg McMuffin
breakfast at 8 a.m. eaten on the way to work, microwave lunch during their half-hour lunch break, pizza for dinner ordered from a cell phone on the way home and delivered to the door, and to top it off a Rock n' Roll show that finishes the night at the same pace. Get them in get them out. Fuck relaxing, there’s no time. And there are so many people that we have to go faster to make room for everyone. Roads become wider, speeds increase, and days become longer and are filled with more activity. And even entertainment, something to enjoy, falls victim to this inability to slow down.

This, I’m guessing, is what my friends and many of the rest of the audience wanted. So Sound Tribe is boring. I know this because when I walked to the back of the room or anywhere away from the stage, people’s conversations about their terrible commute or ten-hour workday were in the foreground, penetrating and overtaking the music. Interesting. And I assume the majority, including my friends, participated in the same thing. They came for a party and to get away from their day. But the escape seems futile because they push the music into the background, drink, and try to score before the show is over. They paid the band so now they figure it’s the band’s job to entertain, but the band has different intentions and is searching for a way to alter perception with sound. They are actually fighting against what the audience is doing. They are trying to slow things down so that people can see.

The lessons of don Juan in Carlos Castaneda’s writing have many of the same connotations. The stories chronicle Castaneda’s adventures and experiences with don Juan, a Yaqui Indian sorcerer. In the third book, Journey to Ixtlan, Castaneda goes
through a mental transformation. With the help of don Juan he begins to see, not in the traditional sense, but the ability to see the inner-workings of multiple worlds, a way of treading the line between the world of ordinary people and the world of sorcerers. Sitting alone in the chaparral Castaneda finds himself lying on a flat rock and watching a beetle. His concentration is so intense that he stops his world and realizes his place. He says, “My elation and joy were so overwhelming that I began to weep. Don Juan was right. He had always been right. I was living in a most mysterious world and, like everyone else, I was a most mysterious being, and yet I was no more important than a beetle” (295). Later on the same excursion, Castaneda encounters a coyote who speaks to him, a sorcerer in disguise, a guide. After his meeting with the sorcerer, he is standing on a hilltop watching the sunset and reflects on the encounter.

I felt something warm and soothing oozing out of the world and out of my own body. I knew I had discovered a secret. It was so simple. I experienced an unknown flood of feelings. Never in my life had I had such a divine euphoria, such peace, such an encompassing grasp, and yet I could not put the discovered secret into words, or even into thoughts, but my body knew it. (298)

The next morning, Castaneda arrives back at don Juan’s house and tells his tale, but after don Juan’s reaction, he is confused.

“But the coyote really talked, don Juan!”

“Now look who is talking like an idiot. After all these years of learning
you should know better. Yesterday you *stopped the world* and you might have even *seen*. A magical being told you something and your body was capable of understanding it because the world had collapsed."

"The world was like it is today, don Juan."

"No, it wasn't. Today the coyotes do not tell you anything, and you cannot *see* the lines of the world. Yesterday you did all that simply because something had stopped in you."

"What was the thing that stopped in me?"

"What stopped inside you yesterday was what people have been telling you the world is like. You see, people tell us from the time we are born that the world is such and such and so and so, and naturally we have no choice but to see the world the way people have been telling us it is." (299)

I believe Sound Tribe operates under similar ideas. By using computers and traditional instruments to collectively create an OHM like experience, they are searching inward and this alters their intentions for playing music. The concert seemed to be a way for them to slow things down, add the energy of a large group of people, and see what happens. Experience. Not entertainment. They want people to close their mouths, shut down the constant internal dialog, listen, and try to stop their world.

I always try but can never slow my mind enough, so I just use the opportunity
to see what happens to the thoughts when I focus on the music. No more driving. No more work. No more. Just thoughts drifting through wavering, tonal sound. I guess I’m still looking for a way to stop my world.

So like the commuter who lost his mind behind me in traffic, my friends and much of the audience expected something that wasn’t going to happen. Just as my little car wasn’t going to accelerate, the band wasn’t going to fulfill expectations of a fast-food world. So who needs to bend? Everyone? To collectively grow, people need to slow down and listen. Not just to others but to themselves, and think beyond the self and to the world, where they have little or no control because there are so many other beings intermingling, crossing over, and crashing into each other.

In many ways it has to do with expectations and people’s inability or lack of desire to adapt, and I find this ironic because humans so easily adapt. So those who’ve become accustomed to a certain way of life refuse to adapt and just carry on as if there were no changes taking place. Stubborn. Or is it is fear of change caught in an elevated sense of hope? Hope that some things will remain the same, beautiful and untouched. But if it is understood that avoiding change is impossible, what needs to be done? How do we get beyond this mentality? How long will it take? Generations. Eons.

On a small scale such as the concert, the effects are minimal and go relatively unnoticed, but globally such a mentality has ramifications beyond comprehension. So expectations need to be fluid not static. People need to take back their ability to adapt. Turn out the lights and look at the stars.
I look in my rearview mirror and see a guy on a crotch rocket quickly approaching. I shift over toward the side of the road into the narrow emergency lane that isn’t wide enough if there were an emergency, and before I have a chance to slow down, the guy zings past. As he barrels into the next hairpin turn, he doesn’t even slow down. He just cocks his knee out, leans low, and with his knee just inches from the asphalt, he banks around the turn and is gone.

The motorcycle speeding past reinforces the diverse uses of the S6 and people’s amusement-park mentality. A mountain of quiet serene beauty used as a test track. Entertainment and fun. A game. A way to pass time and end the boredom and monotony of life. A challenge. I played with the road for a while but lost interest relatively fast. This guy has taken such a game to the next level and come out here just to ride up and down the grades of Palomar. Never noticing anything outside the yellow lines. Head down. Concentrating on nothing but the brakes, the throttle, and the road ahead. Is this his way of meditating? Again, I find myself with completely different intentions and expectations than those around me. I’ll never talk to the rider, never know his thoughts or intentions, but I wonder if he knows.

It’s the same as the concert. It’s alienation brought on by my own way of thinking. So here I am using the road to get up the mountain and away, and this guy and his motorcycle are only here because humans have paved the road. If it was a dirt road, I’d still be driving up the mountain, but he’d be on a paved mountain road somewhere else. It is like he is here only because of man’s creation, and I’m here trying to get away from man’s creation. Intentions and expectations.
It’s a metaphor to this road. My mind has a different path. Minds have different uses, just as this road has different uses. People do with things what they want. All roads lead to the same place. Not likely. And there is irony built in this road because to go from one place to another county roads like this one are much slower, but they actually give a quicker view of California than the straight shot freeways. So by taking a slow back route tourists or people in general wouldn’t have to drive as far to see the real California. And this is interesting because most people are so caught up in getting there they forget that the trip itself matters. So they use the freeways and see only cities, road signs, and distances between destinations on the map.

It’s dark irony. So many tourists come to see San Diego but never really see it. They hear the advertisements like “America’s finest city,” but they only experience what man has brought and added to the land. They forget to check out what brought people here and spawned the city. They never dig as shallow as the S6, never venture out of the brochure. Instead of wandering around in Anza-Borrego, they go to Julian, buy knickknacks, and eat pie; instead of seeing the grasslands and canyons of the reservations, they ride an air-conditioned shuttle to the casino, gorge themselves on grandiose buffets and gamble; instead of watching the dolphin and seabirds or wading in La Jolla’s tide pools, they go to Seaworld, the Wild Animal Park or the “world famous” San Diego Zoo. They stay downtown near the airport and only venture into the amusement park that buries the true San Diego. So, just like Sound Tribe or the guy on the motorcycle, the real San Diego is boring, and in order to draw in money and interest, the natural is covered to accommodate for the fast food vacation. Keep
them occupied. Keep them moving and spending. Speed it up. Get them in and get them out as fast as possible, so the people behind them have a place to stay. It is a shame. They never see San Diego.

So again it is about intentions and expectations. People want to be entertained. They want their kids occupied. They want to do as many things as they can in the two or three weeks they are allotted with their annual vacation. Speed it up.

The idea of time resurfaces. It is always running out. So let’s make everything go faster. The tourist industry in San Diego and what draws people and their money to the city reminds me of a time when I was in Costa Rica. Time is different there, and was different then. I reread my journal and one passage sticks out in my mind:

The lush tropical rainforest set atop Golfito Bay, Costa Rica’s southernmost area, looks as if the mountains grow from the water’s edge. Today I sit rocking away in a handmade chair looking out over one of the world’s most beautiful and undisturbed places. There are no roads to where I am, and recently the government has declared most of the area parkland so there will never be a road. So coming around the bend in the bay by boat is amazing.

Now that the sun has set, I look out across the bay and only a few lights dot the far shore. The only thing left to do is let the sounds of the tree frogs singing and the surf lapping the shore lull me to sleep as the day ends with the setting of the sun. To awake with the sun and sleep with its parting takes me back to a time I can only hope once
existed. A place regulated only by the rising and falling of the tides
and the light of day. A time, rather than place, that still has a home in
my heart.

Just as my body’s rhythm is regulated by the beat of my heart, I
long for days where my life can be regulated by the rhythm of nature.
Existence was once a simple tranquil passage through time, but now
accelerated by man’s insistence on progress my confusion with today’s
world illuminates the search for a passage back in time to the bliss of
simplicity.

Maybe that is part of my alienation. Am I fighting with everyone, trying to get
back to that moment? Is it me who doesn’t have the ability to adapt?

<<PALOMAR STATE PARK 3
OBSERVATORY 5
LAKE HENSHAW 14>>

Although the signs indicate three routes, the road at this point branches in four
directions. The Lake Henshaw route is part of county road S7 or East Grade Road and
leads down the mountain in the opposite direction as South Grade, but it is longer and
much straighter. The State Park route is also the S7, which ends at Palomar State Park
and provides access to parking, hiking and camping. Although the S7 terminates,
other roads branch off into the State Park. One road loops up and around Boucher Hill
and at the top, there is an old fire tower, originally built in the 1940s as a part of the
southern California fire suppression campaign. Although the tower is no longer in
use, Boucher Lookout provides for some beautiful vistas for hikers and for those who
don’t want to or can’t hike, the road leads right to the top. On clear days, it’s said that
Catalina Island can be seen, a distance of over 80 miles. And for the more
adventurous driver, there is Nate Harrison Grade, a dirt road that leads down the
southwest side of the mountain to the 76 in the Pauma Valley area. The road straight
ahead is a residential road and also provides access to sections of Cleveland National
Forest. And the Observatory route, the last leg of the S6 passes through access points
to the national forest before it ends at the observatory.

I turn toward the observatory and start looking for a place to park. The road
here isn’t as windy and drops down slightly as it passes through much denser forest.
The oaks and firs mingle, but the firs take over in the higher altitude in the distance.
Palomar State Park has public camp grounds, maps, and a well marked and
maintained trail system, but national forests occupy so much land in the United States
and are used by so many different people for so many different purposes that there
aren’t parking lots or well-managed systems of interconnected trails. The forests are
used for hunting, hiking, camping, and other activities, and to enter all you have to do
is find a place wide enough to pull off the road and walk in. The rest is up to you.
U.S. Geological Survey maps and a good reliable compass are highly recommended,
and GPS (Global Positioning System) receivers are becoming more common
additions to any trip into the unpaved world.

All the places to pull off on the side of the road look similar; I slow down to
about 20 m.p.h and try to remember how far from the observatory we parked the last
time. None of the parking areas stand out, and it won’t matter all that much where I decide to park since I’m not looking for a designated trail. Up ahead there is a wide, well-used parking area, so I pull off and kill the engine.
you could be anywhere

The sun lingers just past its peak and casts its rays through the break in the forest where the road runs through, but just over a short chicken-wire fence, the sun has trouble breaching the wall of trees. I step out of the truck and gaze into the shadows. Sunshine sneaks through where the tops of the trees don’t meet and the beams of light fall softly to the forest floor as if invited by the young saplings.

Not far back, there’s a place where the road butts up against the edge of a culvert. I walk back to get my bearings. The dip in the mountain subtly rolls down into a wide valley, and since the trees grow at a much lower elevation, the view opens, providing a window into the area, a bird’s eye view of other peaks and valleys in the distance. On the far hillside are the round white domes housing Caltech’s telescopes. They provide a quick bearing, and I head back to the truck to get ready.

I grab a beer from the cab, crack it open, and sit down on the tailgate. I take a long drink from the now lukewarm liquid and reach for my pack. I pull out my socks and shoes and put them on. After stuffing all my food and water into the pack, I put the tent on top of everything to give it some balance and strap the sleeping bag on the outside. I slide into the straps to check and see how the weight will sit on my shoulders. The balance seems fine, and I lean the pack against the back tire.

For the past few trips I’ve taken, I haven’t needed my travel pack. It is big, cumbersome, and hasn’t been necessary. But seeing it leaning against the truck ready to go brings back memories of my travels. I still get camping catalogs in the mail, and
pros are all preaching about alloys and lightweight gear in general. It seems most of my gear is heavier than the new gear and already out-of-date. It hasn’t been but three or four years since I bought all my camping gear. Some of it is older, but most of it I bought for my trip to Mexico after graduation. It’s funny with all my travels and the fact that I know new gear would make hiking much easier, I hold onto this old pack and heavy equipment. I guess it’s memories. And maybe a bit of confidence since the equipment has stood the test of time. Mexico. Australia. Costa Rica. Indonesia. Rain. Cold. Hot. Dry. It never mattered.

When I think about the gear, one image always flashes to mind. I was on my way back from an island off the coast of Northeastern Mindanao in the Philippines. I was alone and traveling by bus to the airport in Butuan City where I had to catch a connecting flight to Manila and eventually LA. It was nighttime, and I was half-asleep. The bus stopped in the middle of nowhere, and in the Philippines, nowhere means nowhere. Other than the little store where the bus stopped, I saw no lights. Beyond the road, there was nothing but jungle.

The bus driver slid the door open, and this old man got on the bus. He looked in his seventies but could have been much older; it was always hard for me to tell Filipino ages. He was carrying a cardboard box with air holes punched in the top and front. My surfboard bag was on the floor up the middle of the bus, so I leaned the bag over so he could get to a seat across from me. After he sat down, he smiled and showed me his prize-fighting cock inside the box. I smiled back and he gestured to me as if to ask if he could let his chicken ride on my surfboard bag. I smiled a “yes.”
No words exchanged. And as he set to box on my bag, I watched the most elated and genuine smile come onto his face. A smile so true and so beautiful that I see it as if he were sitting next to me right now. It’s an image frozen in time.

Over the years, I guess my gear has developed some sort of inanimate personality, and I don’t want to trade it in and start over. These things have become a part of me. I’m holding onto them, and for some reason, we have a past, a working relationship, and I’ve grown fond of my little material possessions.

Taking one last look in the cab, I grab the remaining three beers and the bottle of tequila, lock up the truck, and stuff the treats in the side pockets of my pack. I finish the rest of the beer, toss the can in the back of the truck, lift the pack onto my back, and walk toward the forest wall.

On my way to a small break in the fence, I walk past the Forest Service sign. Adventure pass. What a joke. I wonder if Randy ever paid that ticket. I hope not. The people we talked to after the trip, and the information on the Internet proclaimed the program a “toothless tiger” and said the fines couldn’t be upheld. National Forests should be free anyway. I pay my taxes every year. Why do they want to double tax me for the lands I use? Yeah, I know not everyone uses the forests, but that could be said about many public activities and interests. Hell - I don’t like football, and I don’t go to Charger games, yet I pay taxes for an idiotic ticket guarantee. Both are considered public interests and both are recreational activities. People have different interests – so be it. I shouldn’t have to pay extra for something that already belongs to all of us just because I want to use it. Plus, this could escalate and give politicians a
way to start charging people to use all public parks. A new way to get revenue—they can make the barbecues in city parks operate like vending machines.

Tacked to one of the fence posts is a less conspicuous sign that looks like it’s from someone’s home computer.

**HOW LONG DOES LITTER LAST?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CIGARETTE BUTTS</td>
<td>1-5 YEARS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOOL SOCKS</td>
<td>1-5 YEARS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ORANGE PEELS</td>
<td>UP TO 2 YEARS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLASTIC BAGS</td>
<td>10-20 YEARS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TIN CANS</td>
<td>50 YEARS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALUMINUM CANS</td>
<td>80-100 YEARS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GLASS BOTTLES</td>
<td>1 MILLION YEARS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLASTIC BOTTLES</td>
<td>INDEFINITELY</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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(Commoner 39)

We have since defined Gaia as a complex entity involving the Earth’s biosphere, atmosphere, oceans, and soil; the totality constituting a feedback or cybernetic system which seeks an optimal physical and chemical environment for life on this planet. (Lovelock, *Gaia* 11)

The climate and the chemical properties of the Earth now and throughout its history seem always to have been optimal for life. For this to have happened by chance is as unlikely as to survive unscathed a drive blindfolded through rush-hour traffic. (10)
When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe. One fancies a heart like our own must be beating in every crystal and cell, and we feel like stopping to speak to the plants and animals as friendly fellow mountaineers. Nature as a poet, an enthusiastic workingman, becomes more and more visible the farther and higher we go; for the mountains are fountains—beginning places, however to sources beyond mortal ken. (Muir 91)

It might seem to be a surrender, but I suspect that the rewards, in the form of an increased sense of well-being and fulfillment, in knowing ourselves to be a dynamic part of a far greater entity, would be worth the loss of tribal freedom. (Lovelock, Gaia 148)

Every little thing is a piece of a larger thing.

Ever little fish is a tyrant of the sea.

Every little atom is a master of his family.

Every single piece calls my name.

What do they want from me? (Elfman)

I sincerely believe that we must intimately connect with and love other animals, other humans, and all environments if we are to continue to live with grace and in harmony on this wondrous and interconnected
planet. We need animals, and we need wildness and wilderness, to be healthy human beings. (Bekoff xxix)

It is a privilege to study other animals and to share their worlds and lives with them in this more-than-human-world. As we learn more about how we influence other animals, we will be able to adopt proactive, rather than reactive, research protocols. Part of learning entails changing our practices and asking, ‘Would we do what we did again, or have we learned something that can make other animals’ lives better?’ [...] By making such decisions in an informed and responsible way, we can help to ensure that in the future we will not repeat the mistakes of the past and that we will move toward a world in which humans and other animals will be able to share peaceably the resources of a finite planet. (my emphasis, 173)

Ecology is now teaching us to search in animal populations for analogies to our own problems. By learning how some small part of the biota ticks, we can guess how the whole mechanism ticks. The ability to perceive these deeper meanings, and to appraise them critically, is the woodcraft of the future. (Leopold 222)

Spaceship Earth was so extraordinarily well invented and designed that to our knowledge humans have been on board it for two million years not even knowing that they were on board a ship. And our
spaceship is so superbly designed as to be able to keep life
regenerating on board despite the phenomenon, entropy, by which all
local physical systems lose energy. So we have to obtain our biological
life-regenerating energy from another spaceship—the sun...One of the
interesting things to me about our spaceship is that it is a mechanical
vehicle, just as is an automobile...You know that you’re either going
to have to keep the machine in good order or it’s going to be in trouble
and fail to function...Now there is one outstandingly important fact
regarding Spaceship Earth, and that is that no instruction book came
with it. (Fuller 45 and 47)

Is this just a fortunate coincidence, or is there some deeper
significance to the earth – life relationship? (Nelson 352)

Seldom if ever does Nature operate in closed and separate
compartment, and she has not done so in disturbing the earth’s water
supply. Rain, falling on the land, settles down through pores and
cracks in soil and rock, penetrating deeper and deeper until eventually
it reaches a zone where all the pores of the rock are filled with water, a
dark, sub-surface sea, rising under hills, sinking beneath valleys.
(Carson 47)

Certain portions of matter called organisms perpetuate their own kind
through the operation of an intrinsic program; this property is the
essence of what we call life [...] This basic feature of life, the existence of an over-all relationship joining all organisms of all types can be traced to a common ancestry from which diverse forms have evolved. (Luria 2)

Here again we are reminded that in nature nothing exists alone.

(Carson 55)

And again. And again. And over. And over. The voices are endless, echoing in my mind from the past, through the present and into the future. Simple or complex—the idea is the same. Why can’t more people see this? It seems we, as humans and as a race, need to understand that we are a part of the environment, rather than thinking it’s separate from us, or worse, beneath us. But we are still learning. And by trial and error, we stumble, fall, get up, patch the hole, and proceed.

So how far do we have to trace this back? How many people have to stand up and say the same thing? How many forums need to be addressed? Politics. Environment. Empirical Science. Statistics. History. These people can’t all be wrong. I know we are an infantile race compared to the Earth itself. But why can’t we take warning? People need to start listening. The information is loud and clear. We all need to slow down and listen.

I take one last look back and step through the fence, slipping beneath the canopy of trees. The forest envelops, and I feel I could be anywhere. The canopy quickly blocks any landmarks and as the road disappears behind, I am finally alone.
The dense vegetation places me in a void, and immediately, I feel isolated. The area is so desolate, so serene. I've entered another world. The white firs and incense cedars are abundant at this elevation with giant Douglas firs reaching highest into the sky. The years of needles on the ground soften my steps, and the scent of cedar fills the air.

Now that I'm a few strides into the hike and no longer confined by walls of steel and glass, no longer distracted by the necessity of piloting the truck, I feel free. Fresh air. No roof over my head. No feelings of anxiety. I'm here. And although the weight on my shoulders makes walking strenuous, it's still a welcomed change from navigating the rivers of asphalt through the sea of sprawl. I'm under my own power, my own control. I can go wherever I want. No longer am I herded by anything but an occasional and easily passable fence and my desire to get to High Point before the sun sinks into the Pacific.

PRIVATE
PROPERTY
NO
TRESPASSING

Palomar Mountain is a mountain divided. Not by its own accord but arbitrarily divided by humans who've claimed parts of her as their own. State, federal and private lands intertwine across the mountain. Their twisting property lines are sometimes lined with fences and other times marked only by a sign. Caltech is busy up here observing the cosmos with their giant telescopes scattered about the hillside, so the university employs guards and has fences. Palomar Mountain State Park has
land on the other side of this peak. It isn’t much, but the little land they regulate has rules for use and consequences for misuse. Part of the 460,000-acre Cleveland National Forest is spread through and around all of these fences and is quite a puzzle. They couldn’t acquire the land fast enough for the National Forest and have had to settle for what they can get. And of course private landowners have acquired plenty of acres to call home.

The beginning of this hike is mainly downhill, and I feel as if I’m on a lazy walk. Most trailheads begin uphill. So my descent into the upper edges of Mendenhall Valley feels a bit strange, but I know that once I reach the bottom of the valley, I’ll have to hike up the other side. And it’s nice because the downhill helps me get across the private property faster. Once I get to National Forest land, I can rest a bit, not worry about trespassing, and take my time up Deer Flats. But for now, it’s full speed ahead.

The deeper I drop into Mendenhall Valley, the more prevalent the oaks. And where there is a stream or pond or remnants of a spring, they thrive. The black oaks, found only in California, drop their lobed leaves each winter, so the ground around the trees is thick and soft with years of discarded foliage. The live oaks are more abundant. Unlike the black oaks, they hold onto their leaves for a few years, and various sized and shaped leaves cling to different parts of the trees. Both varieties send their long arms reaching high and wide, and as they grow longer, the thick branches contort and some fall to the ground under the weight.
I know a direct path to High Point is just over a mile from the road, but the switchbacks and rise and fall of the mountain add distance. The problem with access to High Point is to legally get to the top, I'd have to drive out to Warner Springs or Oak Grove and hike up the other side of the mountain. These hikes are all six to eight miles. So before we came out here last time, I bought a U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) map and found that by cutting across some private land and scurrying along the observatory boundary, it takes no time to get to the top. No one noticed us that day, and I figure I'm alone this time, and it should be even easier to slip through. And it's nice of the landowners and Caltech to build these fences because their maintenance crews have to walk though here a few times a year. Their work keeps the brush down along the fence and makes travel easier. Plus by following the property boundary, it helps keep bearings in the densest parts of the forest.

Ahead of me there's an area where no treetops are blocking the sun. When I get to the clearing, I see that most of the trees have fallen. They lie lifeless and rotting. Some of their trunks cross each other, some lie alone on the ground, and a few happened to catch a strong enough branch of another tree that holds the disintegrating tree from falling. Many of them have recently fallen while others are just piles of soft, decaying pulp spread across the ground and are being reabsorbed by the forest.

For the most part, the boundary line of the observatory property winds through dense tree cover, but at certain places, I can see out over the valley. From the high vantage points, large patches of trees look as if they are collectively dying, like
whole chunks of forest have decided to start over. Many of the trees here are deciduous and drop their leaves with the changing of the season, so at first glance, it looks like the trees are losing their leaves as a part of their natural cycle. But it’s the heat of summer, and no matter if they lose their leaves or not, all varieties should be full with new growth.

The break in the trees opens to a view of many more patches of brown burnt-looking dead trees dotting the hillsides. From inside the forest and beneath the trees that still stand firm, the patches seem much larger. And when there is an area that has burned in the past, there are whole clumps of the not so lucky. I walk over to one that has brown needles from the lowest branches up to the top. Piles of sawdust have accumulated on the larger branches and around the base of the trunks. Bark Beetles.

Years of drought has fueled the beetle infestation across Southern California. And it seems thousands of trees in this valley alone have been afflicted. I wonder how bad it is over the whole mountain range and surrounding areas. The small beetles, a ¼ inch or less in length, feed on the phloem or soft tissue just under the bark. They are ruthless, and as I pass through an area burnt by a small wild fire a number of years ago, it seems to be one of the worst afflicted. Relatively no trees still stand in the burnt area, and surrounding where the fire burned, the trees also show signs of the plight but don’t seem to be succumbing as easily. The beetles use the weak and vulnerable trees to start and now are expanding their residence from there.

Access to the dead trees is difficult and in some areas impossible, so the situation is perfect for massive beetle colony. The brown patches that dot the hills and
continue out of sight illuminate the epidemic and are testament to the beetle’s vigorous and seemingly unending hunger.

Once through the affected area, I continue my descent into the valley, and as far as I can tell, I’ve passed onto National Forest land. There aren’t any fences or boundary markers. Feeling safe, I stop, take off the pack, and have a drink of water. Just above where I’m sitting, there’s a slight break in the trees, so I walk higher up to see how far I’ve come. The observatory is above me, and I can just make out the Deer Flats trail through the shrubs as it winds its way to the abandoned fire tower at High Point. From here it looks as if I head that way, I can cut off some elevation change by traversing along the side of the mountain. I may have to push my way through the scrub, but it should still save some time and energy. I scan the hills and mentally map the far side of Barker Valley, so I have a general idea of the landscape. I pick up my pack and continue. I slow my pace slightly, but since I’m growing eager to get to the top, I hold a steady pace.

The other side of the valley is just ahead, and the heat of summer has dried much of the scrub and brush so getting through without a trail isn’t too difficult. I’m nearing where I think the trail is, but I still can’t see it. I push through a particularly dense section of shrubs and find a dried streambed. There’s less growth in it, and I follow it as it meanders up toward Deer Flats. The smooth cobble tells the tale of water, but I see none. I don’t even smell it in the air. It is so dry that I can only imagine how long it’s been without water. I wonder if there is an old dried up spring nearby or if the well has been tapped for another use.
After a few hundred feet, I come to a fork. Two smaller streams part the larger and lead up the mountain in different directions. I stop for a moment and look back. Being off balance from the pack and beer, I was concentrating on my steps over the round, loose stones and didn’t realize how high up the mountain I’d come. I follow the watershed as the streambeds merge, split and wind through the hills leading down to the West Fork of the San Luis Rey River. The streams remind me of the veins of my arm. It’s the same pattern. And has the same purpose. The system of streams provides the valley with its lifeblood. Now that I’m back above the valley, a large community of live oaks is visible, clustered together where the streams come together at the main branch before joining with the East Fork and draining into Lake Henshaw.

In the middle of the watershed and following the veins as they lead up toward the higher elevations is the Deer Flats trail. The switchback is now below. My alternate route wasn’t that far off. I leave the streambed and steep onto the trail. Though the trail makes for much easier travel, there is something special about exploring and finding my own route.

Just a quarter mile or so away is High Point. I have an overwhelming burst of energy and quickly, and with an awkwardly-off-balance-half-walk-half-run, I finish the last of the trail. I stop before I get all the way to the fire tower. I step off the trail and sit down on the soft ground, happily dumping my pack.

I pick up a handful leaves and needles. Underneath are more leaves and needles. Layers of decay. Layers of untouched, ungroomed, unaltered mountain.
When I open my hand, some sticks and the rest falls from my fingers. They fall to the ground, blow in the wind, and blend back into the years of buildup, leaving no trace.

I open my pack, grab the tequila and, as if it is water, I take a long deep drink. It burns, but the calm begins to drip into my soul. I can feel the warming effect drain into my stomach, and since I haven’t eaten, the warm fog enters almost instantaneously. I get back up and wander over to the tower.

On the northeast side of the summit, there’s a clump of trees blocking the view, but it only takes a few steps up the stairs of the tower to take in the 360-degree horizon, a picture’s definition of the word vast. The desert opens to the east. Mountain peaks jut skyward in all directions. And the chaparral seems to never end. When I get to the top flight just below the trap door to the fire watch, I sit down on the top stair and take another long drink.

Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth, I believe. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it. He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the sounds that are made upon it. He ought to imagine the creatures there and all the faintest motions of the wind. He ought to recollect the glare of noon and all the colors of the dawn and dusk. (Momaday 83)

What a sight! A place without. A place within. Beauty. A dream. All of Southern California had this beauty and serenity at one time. Desolation was the norm.
not the exception. But we live an invented nightmare. We took a paradise and created a cement wasteland of impersonality hiding behind walls of steel and glass as ghosts navigate home through a sea of cookie-cutter homes to compete with the Jones’ next door. Will people ever learn? Do they really understand or even care that they’re slowly killing themselves? How long will it be before this mountain is clogged with rooftops and picture windows to take in the view?

I look back toward the city and to the barren chaparral below. Momaday is right. Even though I use this wilderness to get away and never want to see a bunch of people out here, could it be that people should come up here and look out over the emptiness and dwell upon it? Dwell upon what their beloved city looked like before the pipelines channeled the Sierra and Rocky Mountain snowmelt into their homes or looked like before people planted themselves here in hopes of growing a perfect civilization. Should it be a requirement for people to come up here, dwell on the landscape, and think about a land without irrigation, without green lawns, and without bottomless garden hoses. Really see and feel the glare at noon and realize the hostility of their little oasis, their mirage. A hostility to evoke or re-evoke an appreciation for what is not here. Yes, that’s it. Not here. Not seen. This void. This wasteland. Driving through it isn’t the same. And flying over it doesn’t do anything except push reality further from the truth. Denial. Loss of the knowledge of vulnerability.

I take another long drink of the tequila. It warms but no longer has flavor.

Appreciation. That’s what we all need. Make everyone walk through the dry scrub of the chaparral. Send them on a quest for water. Have them follow the
streambeds to the land of lost knowledge. Let them see how on windy days that they can’t retrace their steps back to the road because the wind fills each print with sand or new-fallen leaves. Let them rediscover this knowledge and redevelop empathy for those who came before. Let them realize where they live. Let the mirage blend and disappear into the heat vapors. And let the mirage teach them to live as the land dictates, not as humans decide. Send the ideals of conquering to the past. And send those who walk the desolate walk, those who have taken in the dusk and the dawn to a future of living, a future of understanding, a future where people know that it’s easier for humans to change than to change the land and the world around them.

I try. I tried. I try. I tried. Low to no impact. Wherever and whenever I go, I try not to upset the balance. I tried not to upset the balance. Lead by example. Pack it in pack it out. Great idea. So that we can pack it all together and ship it out of sight. Out of sight—out of mind. Conservation. What a joke. No one seems to give a shit. And if everyone doesn’t participate, it doesn’t work. Shit and trash still stack up, people keep multiplying, and we keep sprawling out farther and deeper into places that aren’t naturally habitable. So what’s the point? I keep wondering what I’m going to do. I have no job and no resources coming in. Just going out. And these never ending thoughts do absolutely nothing for common needs and goals. They are just pointless musings on paying into and supporting the growth.

And no one seems to want to listen anyway. Fuck ‘em then. I’m tired of the battle. What can I do? Shit it may be time to really consider the thoughts of Jim
Morrison and “get my kicks before the whole shit house goes up in flames, awl right!”

Look at the desert. There’s nothing to ruin out there. It’s just a whole lot of dirt, sand, and some dead looking shrubs trying to hang on to life as they send their taproots deeper than they are tall. What can we damage? It already looks dead. And volcanoes are erupting all the time and spilling tons of pollution into the atmosphere, and no one can stop that. All they can do is just move out of the way and let the lava flow to the ocean or some other low lying area, destroying anyone and anything in its way.

*Wilderness*. The word itself is music. *Wilderness, wilderness*.... We scarcely know what we mean by the term, though the sound of it draws all whose nerves and emotions have not yet been irreparably stunned, deadened, numbed by the caterwauling of commerce, the seating scramble for profit and domination. (Abbey 166)

I think this is where people’s thoughts remain. They never think about anything past their immediate situations. Selfish? Practical? Rational? Stupid? It’s an “I Me Mine” kind of world. Does a thought pass through anything other than self-interest as people commute down interstate 5 and look out over the blue of the ocean that created their home? Created the desire to be here. Created the businesses to sustain the desire to live here. Does the commuter driving down the 15 see the beauty of the foothills or just a plot of land flat enough and large enough for a string of tract homes with “easy freeway access”? 
From the sky, the screech of a bird of prey cuts through the silence. A pair of red-tailed hawks is using the updrafts from the lower part of the valley to hover and hunt for prey. They alternate their dives and communicate with each other as they search. Their voices echo through the air toward me. They float higher and higher toward the peak of the mountain and then vanish, dipping into the next valley.

The birds return me to reality, breaking a thought that needed to be broken. Everything is so loud, including my own mind, and so bright that the noise and sensory overload blocks clear sense of direction. And here I am looking out over the desolate beauty. Immersed in the quiet. I made it. The development is nowhere in sight, and the only sound is the wind strumming the branches and leaves of the trees. Amplified by the valley, it billows up toward me, passes over my head and disappears into the desert. But the symphony never stops. No gust, no breeze, no gale leaves the valley without singing, and as the song of the wind composes its endless symphony, and the unique voices swim through the air toward me, I know it all couldn’t have happened by chance.
the wall

The planet as we experience it today is a highly suitable place for living things. The temperature is about right, and there is solar radiation for photosynthesis, plenty of liquid water, and the necessary chemicals for sustaining life. Is this just a fortunate coincidence, or is there some deeper significance to the earth – life relationship? (Nelson 352)

Although something of a consensus has emerged lately among mainstream scientists that the atmosphere is warming and that human activity is a least partly responsible, widespread perplexity and confusion continue to attend the question of climate change. One reason is that the weather itself has seemed so incomprehensible to so many people. Another is that various vested interests on both right and left have muddied the waters of understanding through what might charitably be called a selective reading of scientific evidence. Opposing claims and counterclaims, often exaggerated and distorted, have frequently characterized the debate. (Stevens xxii)

I passed through the cities of North County and into the wildness of nature on top of this mountain, and now I wonder. I wonder about the whole debate. I wonder if answers exist. I wonder if answers are important at all or if the mysteries are perplexing for a reason. Should we stop searching for all-powerful answers and just
understand that truth is a variable in itself, and we, collectively as humans, do affect the environment?

I look out over the green sea of treetops filling the valley below and beyond to the 360-degree horizon, and I wonder. I wonder about life itself and my place in the equation. I’m just one soul in a pool of over 6 billion, so what’s my place in this “life relationship?” For the most part it has been to upset people, but that is a side effect of thinking too much and others thinking too little. And, of course, not having any couth or tact. But maybe such behavior is needed to stir things up and make people look at themselves and to a deeper understanding of the world, even if it’s for only a moment at the local pub.

Now that I’m alone on Palomar’s summit, I see a new perspective. I can see the collective element of San Diego and beyond to global issues in one view. I can’t see the city. I can’t see any people. I can’t see anything but what surrounds me in this forest. But I can see into myself. And I can see a wall. I look east and there is desert starting at the base of the mountain and extending beyond my sight. I look west and there is ocean. I can’t actually see the water through the haze, but I know it’s there. I know, no matter how small, waves continually roll, crash, or lap on the shoreline. What I passed through earlier in the day, I can’t see now, but its looming presence sheds a new light on what I see everyday. Blindness. A gift? Blindness is usually considered a hindrance, but the shade drawn on the city creates a world of insight. Out of sight. Into mind.

I started my morning watching the waves. I started my morning looking west
into hostile desolation. And now as my day wanes into night, I look east into a different, yet equally vast expanse of nothing. Another hostile environment. One where I could never feel at home. Dry, hot, and no water anywhere. A natural barricade to development. Naturally uninhabitable. Or is it?

“In some cases, only a portion of the ecosystem may be suitable for colonization by a population” (Clapham 58). Now this is logic. Practical. And renders a waterless desert out of the equation for human colonization. But since humans are such adaptable beings and can modify the equation, it seems logic isn’t always used, alterations backfire, and we find ourselves in situations where more modification is necessary to sustain an already inappropriate and overburdened ecosystem. The oasis in a world made up of mostly uninhabitable regions becomes a mirage. An illusion. One giant blinder. A giant wall that blocks people’s ability to see. Truly see.

There are many such walls in this world that prohibit people from seeing the other side. Some are natural. Some are man-made. Some are mental. And some are physical. In simplest form—a wall divides and/or protects people, places and/or things. Anythings. A wall that is becoming more and more apparent is one built not by one person or intentionally constructed to keep anyone in or out but a wall nonetheless. And even though the physical features of this wall are built with concrete, steel, and sweat, it’s the mental features that give it strength and hold it up.

In “Native American Perceptions of the Environment,” George Cornell talks about the concept of such barriers:

At the close of the nineteenth century, the contemporary non-Indian
perception of the environment emphasized the necessity of bringing
the natural world under the control of ‘man.’ The earth was to be
dominated and used to provide not only human basic needs, but a
margin of profitability. This process of utilization was not
accompanied by a philosophy which ‘related’ humans to the
environment. (30)

Such a mentality and detachment from the natural world happened because “the
transfer and transformation of species within a world system of commodity exchange
replaced natural complexity with the simplicity of commodified agriculture. [...] The
end result of this process, which was to be extended enormously in the twentieth
century, was ‘genetic erosion’: the loss of diversity” (Foster 92-93). Detachment
allowed for people to settle in large numbers with no regret for what was lost.
Populations pushed out and conquered the natural world and replaced the land with
synthetic materials as they set up larger and larger metropolitan areas for habitation
and profitability. The land was no longer seen as a being. It was seen for what money
and power could be made from its exploitation.

Today, and for all the tomorrows in sight, unabated exploitation continues,
and to maintain the essential element of expansion and further development within
this mentality, more and more lands are needed to accommodate for growth. And it
seems when there is no longer constant growth and development, people scream and
yell about economic meltdown and the ruin of the economy. They can’t see beyond
their own creation and are trapped by what they and their surroundings have become.
Examples of the wall exist around the world, but the climate and topography of Southern California are perfect for manifesting and feeding such a creature. And there seems to be no respite or even any slowing in sight. But how can something always grow? How can there never be any natural entropy? And, specifically, if inflation always rises, we will see what happened to the peso in the 1994 devaluation crisis and the detrimental after effects of true economic meltdown happen again, either here or somewhere close. The bubble broke. And if the wall keeps growing and expanding without slowing or falling back even slightly, something is bound to give and topple. Nothing can always take and not give, expand and not contract, or grow and not die. And the irony is that the same thing that makes Southern California such a desirable place to live creates the optimum environment for the wall and blinds those caught up in its rearing.

A long state with ocean on the west side and mountains then desert to the east pushes settlement toward the coast, essentially eliminating a large portion of the state’s land area. This coupled with an already immense desire to take in the area’s equable climate along the coast creates a wall of development that starts at the water’s edge and sprawls eastward. In San Diego, the wall extends for about 20 miles with the densest part within 10 miles of the coast. In Los Angeles, the wall is 10 or 15 miles wider with the densest parts stretching 20 to 25 miles from the coast. Think about what San Diego looks like from an airplane or from space. Picture the wall of buildings and roadways stretching from the south side of Camp Pendleton to the US Mexico border and into Tijuana and from the water’s edge to Escondido and El
Cajon, where the density slowly dissipates into the chaparral, mountains, and desert. It looks like a wall. But it is a wall to pass through not over, and it takes a Thomas Guide the size of large dictionary to circumvent. This may sound like a maze, but a maze is a game with a goal, a way out, an exit. The wall isn’t a game, isn’t fun and, for many, can never be conquered, and they stay trapped in its web for life.

Much of the wall’s construction has to do with San Diego’s draw. It draws people for work because local industry is booming, and it draws people for the climate, creating a wonderful place where there is plenty of work. So businesses move here and then need more workers who eventually open more businesses that need more workers. It’s exponential growth, and this intense human migration creates a population explosion that both human development and the ecosystem cannot sustain. Of such an infiltration, Charles Elton says:

The reason behind this, the worm in the heart of the rose, is quite simply the human population problem. The human race has been increasing like voles or giant snails, and we have been introducing too many of ourselves into the wrong places...It is just one of the stark facts of this century that man is not only getting more numerous, but wanting more. (144)

When you combine Elton’s statements with such a geographically isolated and climatically dependent place as San Diego, the effects are rapidly becoming catastrophic. Such thinking isn’t isolated or new. J.E. Lovelock says, “As society became more urbanized, the proportion of information flow from the biosphere to the
pool of knowledge which constitutes the wisdom of the city decreased, compared with the proportion entering the wisdom of rural or hunting communities” (Gaia 135). After years of the imbalance “city wisdom became almost entirely centered on the problems of human relationships, in contrast to the wisdom of any natural tribal group, where relationships with the rest of the animate and inanimate world are still given due place” (135). Such thinking led people to focus too much on themselves and now has overshadowed former beliefs in the power of nature and the symbiotic relationship of all beings, including humans, with the surrounding world. The loss of understanding that humans are only part of a larger being, not the center “illustrates the extent to which conventional wisdom of a closed urban society becomes isolated from the natural world” (135).

Such an all-conquering mentality has immeasurable repercussions and without some change doomsday situations may begin sooner than anyone thinks possible. “A common form of this nightmare is Garrett Hardin’s ironic population projections: if we continue our present 2% growth rate indefinitely, then in only 615 years there will be standing room only on all the land areas of the world” (Rueckert qtd. in Glotfelty 113). And Hardin bluntly says, “The optimum number of people is not as large as the maximum the Earth can support; or, as it has been more bluntly expressed, ‘There is only one pollution…People’” (qtd. in Gaia 122). Yes, dire predictions. And although they may not be inevitable, Hardin’s words serve as important examples of the mentality of the wall. He uses numbers in a shocking fashion to catch people’s attention, which is now blocked by their own personal walls, a direct result of never
knowing the potential dangers of blocking out the bigger picture, being trapped in the current of urban taking, and not seeing the “life relationship” that Nelson and other biologists and ecologists see. So in 615 years the population could make the wall as long and wide as the Earth has a place for two human feet (no room for animals or plants) and as tall as the foundations can hold. Unclimbable. There will be so many people that only a select few will be allowed on the surface of the planet at a time. The others will have to stay stacked, doing whatever it is they do on the 2nd, 5th, 7th, or 239th floors. Life will have layers. With privilege will come access. A new commodity—touching the Earth.

And just as Elton speaks globally, Hardin and Lovelock also speak of global ramifications, but once again such studies and statements are applicable to smaller ecosystems as well, and San Diego is rapidly building a regional wall that continues to block more and more people’s views of the natural world and the reality of the situation:

With nearly 15 million people in the region, Southern California’s coastal ocean is coming under increasing environmental stress. There is little coastal space that is not subject to some form of development or resource utilization—including oil extraction, commercial and recreational fisheries, municipal and industrial wastewater drainage, ship traffic, and recreation. (National Research Council xiii)

This study was published in 1990 and doesn’t account for undocumented citizens or the eastward and upward development in the last 15 years. So what is the “optimum
number" of people San Diego can sustain? Did we already surpass it? What parts of the land are “suitable for colonization?” How much “wanting” is too much?

One of the basic features of Earth that makes it suitable for human habitation is the plentiful amount of liquid water, but only a fraction of it is potable and this limited resource is rapidly becoming overburdened, polluted, and insufficient to sustain populations. Studies and statistics from around the globe produce staggering results. And although there are places in the world where no water problems exist, the places suffering or beginning to suffer from a lack of safe drinking water continue to grow. National Geographic writer Fen Montaigne in “Water Pressure” explains the severity of such information:

Hardly a month passes without a new study making another alarming prediction, further deepening concern over what a World Bank expert calls the ‘grim arithmetic of water.’ Recently the United Nations said that 2.7 billion people would face severe water shortages by 2025 if consumption continues at current rates. Fears about a parched future arise from a projected growth of world population from more than six billion today to an estimated nine billion in 2050. Yet the amount of fresh water on Earth in not increasing. Nearly 97 percent of the planet’s water is salt water in seas and oceans. Close to 2 percent of Earth’s water is frozen in polar ice sheets and glaciers, and a fraction of one percent is available for drinking, irrigation, and industrial use.

(9)
So, if all this is known, why aren’t consumption rates changing? Priorities? Here Montaigne is, as the others are, speaking globally. So we have a global water shortage. Is it possible that such non-specific information doesn’t create empathy for the planet? And in order to spread awareness of the impending disaster, we need to concentrate on where people live, so that they can relate more closely to the problems occurring directly in front of them in their local communities. Thinking globally is the ultimate goal, but we have to start somewhere. And an enormous population of people in need of water resides in Southern California, where there is little water or none if population is considered or if piped in snowmelt is somehow interrupted.

This veil, this blinder now inadvertently placed over people’s eyes solely from the mentality that it has always been like this began during the times of initial development in Southern California. Not thinking beyond the almighty dollar, city planners in charge of attracting new prospects to buy into the original dream of Southern California advertised the area as an oasis west of the desert:

Ultimately, the railroad publicists and the chamber of commerce promoters repackaged the Los Angeles region as ‘Our Mediterranean! Our Italy! For more than a century, this Mediterranean metaphor has been sprinkled like a cheap perfume over hundreds of instant subdivisions, creating a faux landscape celebrating a fictional history from which original Indian and Mexican ancestors have been expunged.

(Davis12)

So the wall was originally constructed by a few shady-out-for-profit
individuals, and now the mindset is so engrained in the culture and history of the area, so buried and separated by generations that, at times, I wonder if people deeply embedded within the confines of the artificial wall, within the cement-laden-treeless-waste of downtown areas even know where the water they drink originates. Do they think what repercussions there are as they leave the water running while brushing their teeth?

The missing part of the symbiotic relationship between man and nature has become modern human understanding of this concept, and it’s interesting because with the progress of technology, we now understand much more about this relationship, yet so many choose to ignore it, and we continue to become more removed from the environment. Renewable and nonrenewable resources cease to mean anything different, and even though a relationship beckons give and take, the statistics and studies point to a problem based on taking and not giving back or taking more than needed, which both throw off the balance.

In the West, lack of water is the central fact of existence, and a whole culture and set of values have grown up around it [...] [and] it is said, water flows uphill toward money. And it literally does, as it leaps three thousand feet across the Tehachapi Mountains in gigantic siphons to slake the thirst of Los Angeles, as it is shoved a thousand feet out of Colorado River canyons to water Phoenix and Palm Springs and the irrigated land around them. (Reisner 12)

But now that we have entered the 21st Century, Colorado River water doesn’t
stop by spilling onto the lawns of LA and Palm Springs; rather, it trickles south and quenches San Diego’s growing thirst. In October of 2003, feuding Southern California water agencies finally struck a deal concerning the allocations of Colorado River water. After eight years of disagreement, San Diego secured 65 billion gallons of water per year for 45 to possibly 75 years from Imperial Valley farmers at an annual cost of about $50 million. The amount of water is roughly equal to one-third of the city’s annual needs. Upon completion of San Diego’s Emergency Water Project, the deal will eventually fill all of San Diego’s reservoirs, essentially buying the city time in case of a natural or unnatural disaster that interrupts the flow.

Such facts don’t seem to parallel the original promotions of the area. Modifications have been made to accommodate for the empty promises made by early developers, and Southern California continues to reach deeper into the mountains and beyond to find sources of water to sustain the population and, in turn, further modifies the land that provides essentials. The media presents the water situation as if it has been solved by the new water deal, yet many residents are still uninformed about the area’s lack of water and need to realize that “in the event of projected global warming, the entire range of water problems that California faces today will be intensified, even if precipitation levels remain unchanged” (Knox 19). If we continue to patch the holes in the pipelines and add more links to the system, the wall will grow ever higher, further distancing man from nature and further tapping the Earth’s finite resources. “The unpeopled West, naturally, was where a great many immigrants hoped to find their fortunes. [And just as] they didn’t want to hear that the
West was dry” (Reisner 48), people still don’t want to hear it. But developers continue building east into the chaparral, still seeking their fortunes and continuing aggressive development. Never looking back. Never looking forward. Only waking and turning on the shower to start the cycle over again.

The situation is at an impasse. The predictions are staggering. No longer are the studies headed only by bleeding-heart-environmental activists and ecologists, archaeologists are studying the remains in prehistoric cemeteries of Southern California and, as Mike Davis notes, “now believe that as the desert encroached upon coastal Southern California during epic drought periods, native cultures may have battled fiercely over dwindling water and food supplies” (23). The lack of resources, such as insufficient roadways, lack of housing near work, and high cost of living produce an unhealthy competition. The effects of such a situation can be seen during rush hour or with the median detached family home price, which is well beyond $500,000 and continues to rise.

Speaking about the beginnings of the aqueduct system in the Owens Valley Reisner says, “No one knew when his neighbor would be approached and persuaded to sell out; no one knew when the city would move to condemn; no one knew when the armed guards who patrolled the aqueduct would receive orders to shoot to kill...It seemed only a matter of time before the onset of real war” (94). Is such a scenario returning in the 21st century? What happens if an extended drought occurs? Who will win water rights? Who will be able to afford the commodity of dire necessity? Water. Who will maintain control over the aqueducts and pipelines? Can or will Colorado
one day say “No!” Is the perfect place beginning to show its flaws? Flaws with dire ramifications. This is beginning to sound a lot less like an oasis and a lot more like a disaster waiting to happen. And if everyone knows the significance of changing priorities, sacrificing convenience to avoid an impending disaster, will they change their habits? Will the government have to step in and start issuing fines for water abuse or green lawns or planting water hungry plants? How far can or will the hand of Southern California reach? As these questions go unanswered, the wall grows taller and wider:

What an astounding engineering achievement: Traversing impossibly difficult terrain, this aqueduct had once carried water almost five miles across high ridgetops from the glacial lake to the sprawling settlement of Qoriwayrachina on an otherwise dry mountain. What was so vital about this place that an ancient people would invest such resources and labor to sustain it? (Frost 74)

Within this comment, I could easily place San Diego or Los Angeles or Palm Springs in place of Qoriwayrachina. We are leaving so many clues about our astounding civilization strewn across the desert and mountains of the Southwest. And if we keep progressing like we are right now, our civilization here in Southern California will one day be an archaeological exhibit or anthropological research project for future civilizations. Just as we uncover extinct creatures and buried cultures of the Earth’s past, we are well on our way to becoming the subjects of such expeditions.

Although much of the wall begins at the terrestrial level and is built up from
there, it extends beyond this level, beyond water problems, beyond any solid foundations and is floating in the air, filling in the gaps and, at times, trapping people indoors. Smog. Another building block of the wall. And the combination of fog, smoke, dust, and other particulates is found in all major cities. So, by increasing population and smog, the growing effects are changing the climate, which, again, is a main reason why so many people come to Southern California in the first place. So the wall extends upward into the atmosphere, beyond terrestrial living, beyond the confines of land, beyond solid foundations and into areas without population, and directly effects places never touched by the human hand. Overflow. Marc Bekoff in Minding Animals, agrees and adds:

It must be brought to the surface, for people inevitably have significant impacts on other human, animal, and plant communities, water, the atmosphere, and inanimate landscapes. We intrude wherever and whenever we desire...Even where there are no human settlements, the indirect effects of human intrusions are felt by other humans, animals, and entire ecosystems. (163)

The wall is toppling and spilling into adjacent ecosystems, other areas of human habitation, and exponentially affecting larger and larger areas. Although speaking about pesticides not smog (which in many aspects have similar effects), Rachel Carson asks, “Who has made the decision that sets in motion these chains of poisonings, this ever-widening wave of death that spreads out, like ripples when a pebble is dropped into a still pond?” (118). Metropolitan areas dramatically affect the
environment and climate, and no longer are these effects isolated to adjacent areas; they ride the winds. And since the world is one sphere, can smog from LA affect air quality in the Appalachian Mountains? If the jet stream is funneling air in the right direction, it’s possible.

Global thinking and understanding need to happen. And it does when the action benefits humans. “Man has altered habitats as well as moving species around like chessman” (Elton 33). But after intentional alterations, no more thoughts are given to the situation. The effects aren’t a priority. So global thinking does occur, but is forgotten quickly when the situation isn’t economically beneficial. Rachel Carson asks, who set these chains of events in motion? I ask, who is responsible for the repercussions?

Smog and the populations creating it change climate, but what happens when the climate changes for the worse? People react. They lose their cheery mystique, causing a change in the human spirit. It is like a domino effect. People make cities and then cities change climate. Tjeerd Deelstra says:

Cities are both causes and victims of climate change. Cities emit large volumes of greenhouse gases, coming from sources such as traffic, industry, and households. An example is the Netherlands, where research has shown that more than 80% of all greenhouse gases originate from cities. Climate change may manifest in: higher temperatures; rising sea levels; increased frequency and intensity of storms, rainfall, and floods; [and] changes in ecosystems. (163)
Deelstra speaks of any city, especially those on or near coastlines, but research catered more specifically to the Southern California region states:

The possibility of a strengthened California current developing in response to global-scale warming emerged as a most significant finding in our workshop process. The potential implications of a strengthened California Current are considerable: the California coastline could have cooler, foggier summers; the onshore sea breeze phenomena could be strengthened, increasing the wind energy potential on coastal ridges and confining valleys; and conceivably, some fish species might find these cooler summer waters a haven in comparison with previous projections. (Knox 20)

A study by the Committee on a Systems Assessment of Marine Environmental Monitoring published in 1990 states, “Contaminant input, resource exploitation, and habitat modifications due to construction and other economic activity have led to a suite of environmental problems in the Southern California Bight” (NRC 35). And if the current trends continue and humans continue to affect the environment in such a dramatic way, the equable climate will cease to exist. The sunshine will diminish, the lifestyle and attitude will bitterly change with the weather, and our race will be guilty of destroying the beauty of Southern California.

Smog has been a problem for decades and the following excerpt from a newspaper article printed in 2003 shows the concerns are real and are becoming more widespread and dangerous:
State regulators approved an anti-smog plan Thursday designed to improve Southern California air quality...The move was hailed by residents who testified that smog in their neighborhoods was causing asthma and other health problems, especially in children and older people. ‘This is a significant victory for the community because we are facing a major health crisis,’ said Jesse Marquesz, who represented a group of residents from Wilmington, near several oil refineries...‘Why is it OK for the air I breathe to be so unhealthy it makes me sick,’ asked 7-year old Jonah Ramirez of San Bernardino...Regulations and technology have dramatically improved Southern California air since the 1970s, but the progress has leveled off in the past six years. This summer, Los Angeles had its first stage one smog alert since 1998. By comparison, there were 121 stage one alerts in 1977. The alerts are issued when smog becomes so unhealthy that asthmatics and others sensitive to smog are urged to stay indoors. (Molloy)

Just being outdoors is a danger. And people are “urged” to stay inside. But how can this be? Air quality improved in the 1980s and 90s but has not improved now in six years. Anti-smog policies are great news, but do the changes in regulation balance or even take into consideration population increase? For example, if a policy requires all vehicles to meet emission standards agreed upon by the policy makers themselves, does this account for the influx of more people driving more cars?

Taking into consideration the rapid and ever continuing progress of
technology, it makes me wonder about priorities. Everything in science is about progress; yet, the air in a highly populated area can be unhealthy to breathe. Our most important resource. Oxygen. Without it we die. Does Southern California sound like a desirable place to live? Will it still sound desirable in ten years? Or is the smog created by the wall of people going to cause a mass exodus before the water runs out?

"If it was done intelligently instead of in a mad, unplanned rush, the settlement of the West could help defuse the dangerous conditions building in the squalid industrial cities of the East. If it was done wrong, the migration west might go right into reverse" (Reisner 48). Was it done wrong? Is it continuing to be done wrong? The same dangerous conditions are being found in all big cities, all urban areas around the world. And if the danger is in the water, in the land, and in the air, there is nowhere to run.

There are no certain answers to these questions, and as William Stevens says, "Not all opinions are equal, of course. Not all atmospheric scientists and meteorologists are experts on climate change. Even within the field of global warming research, an expert on one aspect of the problem might not be qualified to judge the merits of an argument on another aspect" (241). But a problem we have clearly identified. Smog and lack of water aren't dire problems for every city or town in the world, but many scientists warn of the effects on global climate. And whether the global ramifications are directly linked to human actions or not, change still needs to take place because if the air quality doesn't improve and the current rate of population increase continues, the air quality will worsen, and before water becomes
the reason to leave, smog will push people out. So responsibility becomes key to change.

Some individuals assert that problems associated with environmental degradation and global warming are part of a natural cycle, but Stevens questions such notions:

Greenhouse contrarians sometimes assert that the warming of the last century represents a natural recover from the Little Ice Age. But what if, having come out of the Little Ice Age, for example, the world has entered one of Gerard Bond’s 1,500-year cycles of natural global warmth? What would be the effect of further greenhouse warming on top of that?” (284)

And Knox adds, “as uncertain as these projections may be, nature has sent and is in a sense sending us a warning signal that human activity and technology are modifying our planet, and the potential for dramatic alteration of our climate system is present” (23). The problem surrounding many of these studies isn’t always the uncertainty or the disagreement, rather, who the publications are targeting. They intentionally target intellectuals and other scientists in a very elite community, but the problems associated with the climate and environment affect a much larger community—the Earth. So instead of targeting others like themselves, these individuals should target the general public and focus on getting the word out to the people who don’t yet know what effect they have on their world. And reducing Steven’s and Knox’s globally charged statements to a personal level—do you want to take the chance?
“Wilderness is the raw material out of which man has hammered the artifact called civilization” (Leopold 264). The wall has been erected and continues to grow up and out. The approximate twenty miles of development from the Pacific shoreline to the transitional area leading into the desert is solid. The cement is poured. The asphalt is laid. The nails are pounded. The screws are tight. The stucco is sprayed. Pipelines bring fresh snowmelt. And then take out wastage. Infill continues to add height and density. And sprawl moves deeper into the chaparral and is rapidly encroaching on the desert. The wall may not stand out like the Berlin Wall or the Great China Wall, but it still divides. Not different political ideologies. Not different races. Not different countries. It divides the natural and the unnatural. It divides the ocean and the desert. It divides the body and the mind:

In every human’s mind is a unique model of reality; not reality itself, but rather an approximation of the real world. The brain’s relatively simple circuitry, for all the wonder it inspires as one of evolution’s most notable products, cannot encompass the full complexity of nature. From earliest times, many human brains together produced a collective, evolving model of the world, held together and transmitted to future generations first by word of mouth and art, and then by writing and cameras and electronic devices. But even collectively, the human model falls short of the real thing and probably always will.

(Stevens 53)

If we can’t figure out all the answers personally or collectively, and I hope we
never do because mystery, in itself, is beautiful, then what needs to change? An environmental crisis we have. Change and alteration continue as we redecorate landscapes around the world. Is the wall part of the natural development of a species? Is such civilization a natural phenomenon? In *The Closing Circle*, Barry Commoner says:

> The fault must lie not with nature, but with man. For no one has argued, to my knowledge, that the recent advent of pollutants on the earth is the result of some natural change independent of man. Indeed, the few remaining areas of the world that are relatively untouched by the powerful hand of man are, to that degree, free of smog, foul water, and deteriorating soil. Environmental deterioration must be due to some fault in the human activities on the earth. (125)

Is the circle closing? The ocean and the desert are already divided by land, but the wall further divides them and further divides man and nature. So now we have dense development and the side effects grow. The wall blocks the circle, blocks the give and take, and inhibits a harmonious “life relationship.” And in Southern California, we are teetering on the edge of not only the Pacific Ocean but also the edge of a wall of our own creation. A wall that gets taller and wider as time and technology move ahead. A wall that, as it grows, is leading up to an even greater fall.

Since the initial stages of selling Southern California as an oasis, there have always been concerns, but these weren’t always addressed:
In the West, of course, where water is concerned, logic and reason have never figured prominently in the scheme of things. As long as we maintain a civilization in a semidesert with a desert heart, the yearning to civilize more of it will always be there. It is an instinct that followed close on the heels of food, sleep, and sex, predating the Bible by thousands of years. The instinct, if nothing else, is bound to persist.

(Reisner 14)

Logic and reason. The semidesert and much of the West is part of a large ecosystem, and much of it is not suitable for habitation by a small group of humans much less tens of millions. We can modify it to sustain life, but for how long? The debate continues and as population grows more patches are laid to fix the problems associated with overburdening an ecosystem not set up for such a civilization. And even though we may never have all the answers to nature’s wonders, a change in priorities, intentions, expectations, and mentality in general is needed for future generations to enjoy the endlessly unique and beautifully intricate characteristics of nature:

Old Grandma shook her head slowly, and closed her cloudy eyes again. “I guess I must be getting old,” she said, “because these goings-on around Laguna don’t get me excited any more.” She sighed, and laid her head back on the chair. “It seems like I already heard these stories before... only thing is, the names sound different.” (Silko 260)
Here Old Grandma is speaking about an Indian friend who was involved in shady activities and has been killed. She is talking about names. But what if the names of the people changed to the names of cities. New York. Mexico City. Tokyo. Seoul. London. Los Angeles. Honolulu. Cairo. Chicago. Newark. Beijing. Moscow. Washington D.C. New Delhi. The list goes on and on. All these cities, as Grandma says, are telling the same old stories. Stories of corruption. Stories of pollution. Stories of over-population. Stories of a lack of resources. Stories of pain. At times, the problem is so bad that birds fall out of the sky. And just as Silko uses Grandma’s experience with the death of a family friend to address the estrangement Indians felt as white people encroached on and redecorated their lands, the same would be said if the inanimate landscapes, manipulated and destroyed by man’s quest to conquer and commodify nature, could talk.

Why are all these cities in the same predicament? What is the draw? Work. It can’t be since so many people in these densely populated areas can’t find work or just don’t work. The good life. No, not likely. When so many people come so quickly the good life becomes a trophy. Something to battle for. The “I have two million dollars so I’m going to live right here on the beach in La Jolla, and you can’t do anything about it except sleep in the alley between my house and the next” kind of mentality becomes a driving force. I think Old Grandma is right—sounds like I’ve heard these stories before.
Much of the research into forced climate change by human action is directed globally, but other studies focus on smaller regions or more isolated ecosystems. One specifically designed to observe Southern California’s coastal systems states:

As a result of Southern California’s large population and attendant intense economic and recreational activity, there is little coastal space that has not been subject to construction, mineral extraction, or other forms of resource utilization. This activity has resulted in extensive habitat change and large and varied inputs of contaminants to the bight. (National Research Council 15)

San Diego’s population grows each year, and since all the coastal area is already occupied or those moving here can’t afford homes near or even within 20 or 30 miles of the coast, there are two things that happen: infill and sprawl. So why aren’t we, as one species within a much larger being, using places like Southern California as examples of what not to do or how to work in unison with nature and learn how to give back and balance the environment? Why can’t we use specific examples to help inform others how to properly work with the land and not against it?

Severe and powerful examples from the past that no one seems to know about could easily illustrate the detrimental effects of taking without giving:

Oil extraction has occurred for eight decades within and offshore of coastal city limits of Goleta, Carpinteria, Ventura, Oxnard, Santa Monica, Redondo Beach, Wilmington, San Pedro, Long Beach, Seal Beach and Huntington Beach. Terminal Island and adjoining areas
sank up to 30 ft when oil was pumped out in the 1930s and 1940s.

(National Research Council 12)

We need resources to maintain our modern way of life, and this is fine, but when extreme side effects occur and affect the land adversely, something needs to change. Such actions and the effects aren’t published and these activities aren’t modified because relentless oil extraction continues with relatively no thoughts outside the realms of political power and financial profit. And such effects on the land don’t account for the spilled oil floating as tar bubbles on the surface of the ocean, drifting in, and either rendering birds flightless, attaching to the fur of seals, or staining the skin of a surfer or foot of a beach goer. Natural seepage occurs, and Indians inhabiting the area long ago used the tar to seal their boats, but why should we add to the problem? People’s priorities are all mixed up, the Earth and its resources continue to be marketable commodities, and the repercussions are dismissed as mere side effects.

Whether it’s human activities, natural phenomenon, or a combination of both that cause climate change and alter ecosystems around the globe, the current situation is leading to some serious decisions about the problems. In Regimes for the Ocean, Outer Space, and Weather, the authors ask some intriguing questions about such decisions:

If weather and climate changes are naturally induced, does the entire international community bear some responsibility for helping those who might be most adversely affected? Where there are presumably
many diverse human activities contributing to the gross changes, who is to be held responsible for the damages or for bearing the costs of restricting the activities? (Brown et al. 226)

It seems too many people point figures at others and ignore their own actions, and on a global scale, it is always someone else’s problem. Global community is a beautiful sentiment, but starting with emphasis on the responsibility for sweeping your own doorstep would ideally keep the world clean. And to add to the questions posed: who would be responsibility for overseeing that all factions of the global community do their part?

The United Nations hasn’t worked and continues to be a voiceless carriage of bureaucratic wastage. In 1963, Haile Selassie, former emperor of Ethiopia, addressed the United Nations about wrongs and damages occurred to human beings, specifically his countrymen. In part of his speech, he proclaims:

That until the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned: That until there are no longer first-class and second class citizens of any nation; That until the color of a man's skin is of no more significance than the color of his eyes; That until the basic human rights are equally guaranteed to all without regard to race; That until that day, the dream of lasting peace and world citizenship and the rule of international morality will remain but a fleeting illusion, to be pursued but never
attained [...] and we know that we shall win, as we are confident in the victory of good over evil. (Rastafari)

Many powerful ears felt the barrage of his words that day, yet few listened, and countries still wage massive wars for such reasons as skin color or religious differences. How can we have global waste management system when we can even treat other humans with dignity?

Although much of the data gathered about people affecting the climate negatively isn’t 100% empirical fact, and answers may lie somewhere between human responsibly and normal thousand year cycles, why take the chance?

Humans are all over the place. Give us an inch and we take a foot and then some. There are no places on Earth, in bodies of water, or in the atmosphere that are not influenced by human activities. As such we are a part of nature. We are not above other animals, nor are we lesser than other animals. We also are an integral piece of nature with great responsibilities that can no longer be pushed aside for convenience or because there always will be someone else to clean up the messes we leave. Our big brains convey enormous responsibility for taking care of all of nature. (Bekoff 175)

The warnings are loud and clear and have merit, so it’s time to change priorities and selfish acts and think beyond the confines of time compressed daily life and beyond personal issues. It’s time to be proactive and address the reality of these problems and act before it is too late.
J.E. Lovelock says, “Humans on Earth behave in some ways like a pathogenic microorganism, or like the cells of a tumour or neoplasm” (Healing Gaia 153). And although he has the tendency to be overly scientific for the general population, he raises valid questions about the Earth, or Gaia as he refers to it, and comes up with potential ways of fixing the problems. They are “destruction of the invading disease organisms; chronic infection; destruction of the host; or symbiosis – a lasting relationship of mutual benefit to the host and invader” (153). Considering these choices, the last sounds the most fruitful for the human community. Even if people believe such destruction is inevitable, no one truly wants to go the way of the dinosaur. And human disagreement between countries, between cities, and between ideologies adds metaphoric rebar to the wall that divides man and nature:

The earth has experienced not only a “population explosion,” but also, and more meaningful, a “civilization explosion.” People, and indeed their growth in number, are the source of the vastly elaborated network of events that comprises the civilization of man: the new knowledge of nature generated by science, the power of technology to guide natural forces, the huge increase in material wealth, the rich elaboration of economic, cultural, and political processes. (Commoner 114)

It seems as population increases, communication should be easier because everyone is closer together, more tight-knit, but even with the advent of global communication this hasn’t happened, and the world stays divided as population increases everywhere. As numbers grow, the problems parallel such growth, and
None of the environmental agonies now confronting us – the
destruction of the tropical rainforests; the degrading of land and seas;
the looming threat of global warming; ozone depletion and acid rain –
would be a perceptible problem at a global population of 50 millions.
Even at a billion people, these pollutions would probably be
containable. But at our present numbers – more than five billion – and
present way of living, they are insupportable. If unchecked, they will
kill a great many of us and other species, and change the planet
irreversibly. (Healing Gaia 155)

And as the globe warms, the separate factions of human civilization will divide
further. Those in the polar regions will enjoy the warmer weather and those in the
tropics will have to leave or die.

Why can’t we share the Earth? Why can’t we work together? Why not take on
the responsibility to ensure a healthy planet? What is the catalyst “to make you feel
for Gaia, or for the Earth, as you would about your own body” (Lovelock, Healing
Gaia 175)? How can we bring the issues to a personal level? What will it take for
each individual residing on this planet to understand that “there are many simple
things that each of us can do to live better with Gaia. We cannot manage the Earth, but
we can usefully regulate our own lives, and our human institutions” (176). We have
to understand that in order to live in a symbiotic relationship with our spaceship that
individual action is the way to alleviate the problems that have global and grave ramifications. We have to bring all these scientists off their high horses and teach them how to communicate with and educate the public rather than just participating in ineffective forums of discourse in an isolated intellectual community. The answer begins with the individual and ends with the entire planet. There are no quick-fix solutions that will fall from the sky one day or come to fruition in some laboratory petri dish. Such studies are important, but they aren’t the end-all solution to the world’s problems. Why not become stewards of the Earth? Why not treat her like a mother?

Ignore the beauty. Ignore the weather. Ignore the vast ocean and desert. Ignore the coyote and dolphin. Ignore the mountains. Ignore development. Ignore each other. But no one can ignore forever. Something is bound to happen. And it seems it may very soon. Human history is a mix of salt and sugar and this makes our culture a mixed up sweet and savory mess. Our needs are at an impasse with our abilities and desires. The wall is built. It blocks the view out the window, and it blocks the view inward. The inward wall, the mental wall won’t come down easily. It isn’t the Berlin Wall, where sledgehammers and machinery can take it down. This wall is much stronger. It is one that is built by millions. “To elucidate the interaction of man and his habitat, we must seek out, then, among all these human activities, those which form a sequence that enables us to return to our starting point, the ecosphere” (Commoner 114). The wall is interrupting the battle between the ocean and the desert. It keeps the two from engaging in their healthy competition. And it’s creating
irreparable damage to the perfect equable climate of San Diego? And the very essence of the wall keeps it from withering. How tall and wide will it grow? What will it take to knock the first brick out? Who will take it down from the inside out? How will people relearn to see?

The sun dips behind the western peak on the far side of the valley, and the high points cast chilly shadows across to the eastern side of the valley. The light runs from me, and as I watch the round ball of fire sink below the mountain, the light fades to a somber glow emanating, boiling up from the horizon. My day is done. So I stand here looking around in a circle. A circle of life. I’m in one ecosystem, and I can see outward to many more. Different, yet equally important. I look out to a perfect climate for human habitation lying beneath a hovering layer of smog. I see it gradually being altered everyday either by nature, by man or by both, and I still don’t know. But I think I know better than most because I walk alone in a world with no answers. If they say it’s the truth, then why is it always changing? For now, I’ll just laugh in the face of desperation. I’m living just for life because nothing else matters, and I’m loving the freedom that comes when I briefly stop caring. But that never lasts, so I ask, who are they? And now it’s time that you, I, and the collective we decide whether or not to listen to what they’re saying.
afterword

One morning before dawn about three years ago, I went surfing at Horseshoes, one of the reef passes at the top of the point in La Jolla. It was just after daybreak when I hit the water. The lineup was empty, and I was alone. Or so I thought. Floating just above the surface of the reef below were several garibaldi, a type of damselfish. They looked like blurry orange splotches through the water as they wavered in the currents letting the long strands of seaweed envelope them with the passing of the swells. Even with all the water in motion, they moved very little. They just used their tail motions to counteract the movement of water, and when the swells brought in shrimp or tiny fish larvae, the garibaldi feasted. An ecosystem was ebbing and flowing beneath me.

When I turned back toward the beach, I stopped dead and stared at the dense development. A line was drawn in the sand; the contrast illuminated the division between humans and nature, and the separation was never more evident to me. Beginning directly at the water’s edge was cement. It was everywhere. Walls. Roads. High-rise structures. The entire hillside was a cement dome erected for the sole purpose of taking in the westward view.

These images inspired me to write a song:

Metaphysical Surftrip

The sun is shining,
On the misty morning juice.
Watching silhouettes appear,
Through the hazy hues.
Footsteps are thundering,  
On the pathway to your soul.  
The spirit treads quietly.  
Don’t let your heart be sold.  
Babylon empty your head,  
So your thoughts can flow.  
While your mind is wandering,  
Go out where the wind can blow.

Cool breeze blowing,  
Out away from the shore.  
Mountains in motion,  
Plenty of caves to explore.

Evolution’s running so fast,  
We’ve got to slow it down.  
Drive-thru beer and coffee stands,  
No time to let things flow.  
Please question the path your on,  
It’s time to break the mold.  
Override this thrashing pace,  
Slow has more time to grow.

We are walking,  
Out seeking the truth.  
Let the old pass on.  
Leave us the spirit of youth.

Leaving from this dismal place,  
Our race don’t know where to go.  
Believing in a Promised Land,  
Where newfound time is gold.  
Mocking social battle grounds,  
From this distant view.  
Traveling through a quiet void,  
Shaded from intellects and fools.

Now a few years have passed, and here I sit under the warm sun of North County, San Diego. Spring is just settling in and although it’s hot in the sun, the northwest breeze meanders its way through the winding neighborhood streets of
Oceanside and leaves me with the chills until the wind wanes and the rays of the sun take over heating my back and smoothing out the goose bumps on my arms. Should I go in and get a jacket? No, I’d be too hot. So I’ll just deal with the microcosmic battle between the sun and the ocean here in the backyard and bask and shiver just as I do off and on all year long. But too many people don’t deal with being slightly uncomfortable and seek ways to modify or change the climate or in the case of the millions of people here in Southern California, they come in search of a perfect climate.

My Quandary

Somewhere along the road to developing our advanced civilization, an impractical pattern of thought has developed and disrupted the symbiotic relationship between humans and nature. Today, such harmony is no longer considered essential, humankind lords over earth and all its resources, and too many people believe the earth’s finite resources exist solely to support a vast and ever growing human colonization.

Humans are amazing beings. We can build giant metal ships and blast them into space solely to satisfy curiosity. We can pipe water 3,000 miles across deserts, over mountains and into homes where no water exists. We can do more with our minds than any other creature on the Earth, but with such ability should come responsibility.

Overpopulation is slowly killing the planet, and all its inhabitants, including humans. I make this differentiation because this, in itself, is one of the problems and
exemplifies the separation between humans and the natural world. Humans seem to always place themselves outside descriptions of earth and continue to conquer a world that, in no way, needs to be conquered. As the environment deteriorates and humans become further separated from nature, the human spirit suffers, and the world becomes an impersonally inorganic world of synthetic nightmares. Reality becomes man-made. Resources are finite, and the struggle to acquire essential needs for populations that exceed sustainability fuels unhealthy competition between all inhabitants of the planet. The situation is dire and so widespread that before the downward spiral hits bottom, it is time to stop and ask: How can we relearn responsibility and stewardship for the planet?

One in a Long Line

Many have posed such questions, and many of the ideas I present are not new. Past and present writers use fiction, non-fiction, nature writing, and philosophy, among others to slow and stop the deteriorating relationship between humans and nature. Henry Thoreau, a classic nature writer, uses Walden Pond and other natural surroundings in the Northeast as a metaphor of the world. He sees the symbiosis and the parallels between civilizations all over the world and intends to enlighten people to the idea that what they seek is already in front of them. In Walden, he says:

The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologist and antiquaries chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit,—not a fossil earth, but a living earth; compared with
whose great central life all animal and vegetable life is merely parasitic. (1795)

By showing what the natural world has to offer, Thoreau helps people revisit their place alongside earth. He wants people to eliminate the conquering mentality and see the beauty the world has to offer is right in front of their eyes.

Rachel Carson took a different path; in 1962, she used scientific evidence in *Silent Spring* to expose pesticide abuse and its effects on the earth and the human populations, resulting in the development of the Environmental Protection Agency. In her book, Carson uses a metaphor to a silent spring as a way to discuss human irresponsibility, and says that “a grim specter has crept upon us almost unnoticed, and this imagined tragedy may easily become the stark reality we all shall know. What has already silenced the voices of spring in countless towns in America?” (14-15). She poses this important question, and with *Silent Spring* uncovers and presents many of the answers, which point to irresponsibility and lack of foresight.

J.E. Lovelock also uses empirical research. In *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*, released in 1979, he outlines the science of symbiosis with the goal of reeducating his readers about the symbiotic relationship that is failing with modern civilization. He wants all people to relearn how to be stewards of the earth and alleviate “[...] man’s insatiable curiosity and his irresistible urge to experiment and interfere with the natural order of things” (107). He provides proof of a deteriorating environment in an attempt to slow the downward spiral.

Embedded in history and environmental journalism, Marc Reisner, in *Cadillac
Desert: The American West and its Disappearing Water, discusses California’s development and addresses how humans overcame the lack of water in the Southwest. Reisner says, “Any place with less than twenty inches of rainfall is hostile terrain to a farmer depending solely on the sky [...] Everything depends on the manipulation of water [...] were it not for a century and a half of messianic effort toward that end, the West as we know it would not exist” (3). His investigation focuses on the problems associated with the ecosystems where the water was taken and the engineering feats and corruption associated with the task of bringing it to the people who were promised the essential resource.

Mike Davis also uses a type of journalism to address the urban explosion and its effects. By focusing on potential disasters triggered by misuse of the environment in order to sustain metropolitan areas, he illustrates the idea that widespread human habitation wouldn’t exist in the Southwest if it weren’t for the amazing engineering abilities of humans. In Ecology of Fear, he explains that cities like LA and San Diego are “creating a faux landscape celebrating a fictional history from which original Indian and Mexican ancestors have been expunged” (12). The urban illusion is so embedded in generations that people don’t even know what the natural looks like anymore.

The list of writers attempting to return empathy with the earth, as a being, to human consciousness is much too long to present in this forum. I present a few here to serve as a jumping off point. In abstract forums, these writers tend to present either the beauty of nature or the detrimental effects of human civilizations in isolation
when in reality the two exist together. Through this, they set up artificial divisions of the urban and the wild. And when the two never interact, this artificial division between humans and nature is implied and pushes the idea of symbiosis further away. Yes, these writers support a working relationship for the planet, but their work doesn’t mirror the idea. They unintentionally divide humans and nature.

My Vision

To close this writerly gap between society and nature, I place my main character, Sam, in both environments and outline the need for both the urban and the wild, recombining the idea with the reality. Sam’s tale is a metaphor of Southern California’s loss of symbiotic connection to the earth and to the contradictions found within the self and in the digression of human civilization due to the loss of an understanding of the idea of finite natural resources. People want it all. Beautiful weather. Unlimited water. Cars. Convenience. Recreation. The Easy Life. But, in Sam’s eyes, there is a need for open space and a place to get away from it all and work issues out for the self. His quest is interrogating the cost of having anything and everything at anytime.

Far gone from predevelopment descriptions of empty California sun, Soul of Water begins at the water’s edge with Sam looking westward over the empty and vast Pacific Ocean. Nothingness is what he thinks he wants and has briefly found, but the emptiness is only in one direction. Behind him to the east is a cement jungle that begins at the water’s edge and covers what was mostly untouched coastal scrub just 50 years ago.
But Sam isn’t just sitting on the edge of the ocean and the land, between the urban and the wild, he is also teetering on the edge of sanity. He is drawn to the urban excitement of Southern California but at the same time deeply laments the loss of space, which mirrors his loss of purpose, and his journey begins. A journey through the mayhem of dense urban development. A journey into the land of population explosion with no practical infrastructure to sustain it. A journey into frustration. A journey away. And a journey inward into his self. Sam is attempting to rediscover who he is in a place where he no longer feels that he belongs. He believes people in the urban setting have lost their connection to the environment, which he feels is essential for life and is needed to reshow others what is important to them and, in essence, what is essential for humans to continue with such an amazing civilization.

In order for me to paint a picture, externally and internally, of Sam’s struggle, I found stepping away from convention was necessary. The vision in my head of Sam’s journey didn’t conform to any set genre. With this in mind, I chose to draw elements from narrative, history, and science, and place Sam in the actual landscape of North County, San Diego. And to help create a realistic feel, I drew from autobiographical episodes in my life (using exaggeration), which helped me become a part of Sam and him a part of me. By using multiple genres, the openness allowed me to more closely contrast the serene and the chaotic and slow down and speed up the narrative where appropriate in order to mirror what was going on with Sam, both internally and externally, without overloading the reader with too much writer interjection.
The narrative begins traditionally with a slow descriptive pace, which parallels Sam's somber mood and also the peace and quiet before daybreak. Time compressed daily activities have yet to start, but when Sam leaves the emptiness of the ocean, the day that he never wants to begin hits so fast that he has little time to react. He is so spun out that all he can do is run as millions of people swirl around him in the daily grind. At this point, I utilize multiple genres to speed up the narrative and capture the cacophony of the urban lifestyle:

Interpretation takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted, and proceeds from there. This cannot be taken for granted, now. Think of the sheer multiplication of works of art available to every one of us, superadded to the conflicting tastes and odors and sights of the urban environment that bombard our senses. Ours is a culture based on excess, on overproduction; the result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience. All the conditions of modern life – its material plentitude, its sheer crowdedness – conjoin to dull our sensory faculties. (Sontag 696)

Sam is struggling with this on the outside and on the inside. He sees and muses on this overload, but at the same time he is dulled to certain aspects of our culture. He is running from the mess of the urbanization, and in the meantime, he is losing the sharpness he needs in his quest to rediscover his true self in all the madness. Such overload, as Sontag notes, makes people unaware. Too much becomes nothing in the flash of the high paced urban lifestyle. People disappear in the blur of life, can’t catch
up, and then the problems escalate to the point where people no longer see or care.

Sam is teetering on this edge. He doesn’t know whether to just give up or continue his quest to reorient the lost masses to their senses.

This digression continues, and as Sam decides to take a trip into mountains and get some thinking done, the text breaks apart more, which creates more tension and shows his frustration with the unavoidable passage through the urban wall. The different threads (i.e. music, signage, internal dialog, narrative, and non-fiction) represent the over-stimulation of urban density located between the Pacific and the rural areas to the east, which are rapidly disappearing and being incorporated into the city. In the text, the signs, music and quotes appear throughout with little or no commentary from Sam. These are placed in the narrative as they would pass naturally on the road or in passing thoughts. I don’t analyze them very often because I want them to remain, for the most part, on their own. Most of them stand and speak for themselves with no need for further authorial interjection. For example, why would I need to explain a reality sign indicating homes from the low $600,000s? This is shocking and an abomination. I don’t think it needs analysis or commentary. Too much interjection from the author at these places would be intrusive to the reader’s ability to develop individual ideas and opinions.

The farther east Sam travels, areas of less development and less sensory input are more widespread. He is finding the space he longs for, and as his mind begins to clear, he turns inward and explores his frustration in an unhindered, uninfluenced way. At this point, the narrative slows and starts returning to the pace of the scene at
the beach. The multigenre wanes, and the text alternates between Sam's internal
dialog and descriptive narration. After a relatively short hike and musing on open
space, the narrative stops, and a discussion of what ramifications happen when
humans don't take responsibility or "stewardship" of earth's finite resources begins.
In Sam's eyes, smart development in San Diego has become an oxymoron.

Throughout his journey, Sam revisits his past studies of ecology and the
environment as a way to reeducate himself and as a way for the narrator to help bring
information about environmental degradation, climate, and human effects on these to
the reader. With this in mind, I wanted to try something new, something different. So,
interlaid throughout the narrative, I use other texts, but where the authors use science,
philosophy or politics to return humans to their place in the world rather than on top
of it, I use their works to trace what has happened, then I add what is continuing to
happen to bring the past, present and future of the environment back to the forefront
of conversation. And by threading the non-fiction together with narrative, I provide a
plot to follow, which alleviates the boredom many people claim fills textbooks and
non-fiction, and I create a character to identify with as he fights with himself and the
world, as his struggle becomes a metaphor to the struggle of Gaia. Although the
emphasis is education, responsibility and sustainable development, I avoid telling the
reader what to think; instead, I provide the information and leave it to each reader to
decide what to do and how to react.

The manuscript is designed to involve all people in the character and then hit
them with the harsh reality of why the character is so fucked up. At times he is loving
and genuine and at time pompous, self righteous and arrogant. I don’t want this to be discarded as a mere eco-rant or just another bleeding heart narrative. So, by bringing non-fiction together with a character that the reader can love and hate, I create a muse who exposes the inherent contradictions, juxtapositions, and incredibly difficult decisions we face as individuals, as humans, as a global race, and as a community or, as many call humans, a virus, a disease, and a rapidly developing holocaust.

The quotes and references show motive, which is to change a way of thinking, not just to cry about the loss of beauty and nature. Human kind doesn’t need to conquer nature. That is an antiquated thought. This mentality has been perpetuated through generations of neglect and needs to change. Such a change in thinking and in philosophy has implications outside environmentalism and is applicable all communities on this planet. Intentions and expectations for living harmoniously in a global community or a local community are similar if not the same. Cities affect the human spirit and people crowded together lose sight of what is truly important. They get caught up in bills, work, and the rat race and forget about looking to themselves as part of something much larger. Whether it is throwing a piece of paper into the wind, not being water conscious or developing 100,000 acres of chaparral with tract homes, it comes down to individual desires and decisions. Needs and wants. Intentions and expectations. People want more than they need, way more, and this mentality is tapping into the finite resources in their backyard, in their neighborhood, in San Diego, in the US, and in the world as if all resources were infinite.

I want to help rid people of the “out of sight out of mind” mentality. I want
people to know where water comes from. I want people to know how they affect others. It seems many people regard themselves as insignificant, and I want Sam’s trip to show them how they do affect the world, even if it isn’t huge. Each person has a responsibility and needs to relearn the things taken away and convoluted by generations of neglect. I want Sam to help people feel the symbiotic relationship they have with the earth and relearn the balance, relearn the harmony, and relearn how they affect such a symbiotic relationship. Each individual needs to, in Sam’s eyes, do their part. It is a mentality and priority problem. Individuals need to search and hold themselves personally responsible for their world. The problem is global, yet the solution lies with the individual.

Water is essential for life, and since it is so lacking in Southern California, I found it to be a perfect muse, a perfect way into addressing the impractical yet amazing engineering ability of the human race. The urban areas of Southern California are designed with little practicality when considering the lack of resources and the costly feats of bringing water to the region. The inner workings of the cities are rapidly taking over and blocking out the view of the natural. I use water as a way to address needs and wants and intentions and expectations and as a way to evoke a change in mentality. This project is a story of struggle, of history, of life, and serves as a warning to all.
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