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

I.*
On once sacred land
Caterpillars cut quarries,
turn (perhaps into butterflies)
and disappear.
A land where bearded men
rode horses crossed
dirt roads, dusty trails,
woven paths on a
dead, red volcano.¹
Now, soulless machines
strip mountains,
bore earth
like feral pigs,
whizzing, clanking,
crushing—

    Men piss on the rocks.

Man paved over the Elsinore trough;
made the land work for him.
Once the sky
Was a clear blue hue;
maybe a cloud or two…
Now it’s checkerboarded
with crisscrossed contrails
from passenger jets.
F-16 Fighting Falcons
Dominate the skies.
Blackhawk helicopters,
V-22 Osprey tiltrotors
break and chop up
sound barriers
with neo-birdcall—

    (Cue Wagner’s, “The Ride of the Valkyries.”²
    (Here’s to Apocalypse Now!))³

Make the thunderbird

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

¹ Hudson p. 24 – “In the same year of the first visit to Temecula came another party... In the party were David Jackson, for whom Jackson Hole in Wyoming is named, and John Trumbull Warner, who would become famous as owner and operator of Warner’s Ranch.”
² “Ride of the Valkyries”
³ Coppola
look like a mud hen!
Fft fft fft fft fft!
Smog is the new fog!
Artifice is the new Nature!

    Dead, red volcano groans under the weight of modernity.
Civilized man scrapes the face off the rock,
    rips out its granite heart,
    blasts it into rubble;
now the land is unrecognizable.
Stagnant water in the pool where Tenaja Falls used to flow when it rained soft rain
stinks like amphibian waste.
The frogs’ dried up bodies are there bleached on the banded rock.
I throw stones in the pool; water still moves as it should.
A small splash produces ripples which radiate across the whole surface of the water,
spreading out in all directions, ceaseless, growing more complex with each second—
Hidden numbers.
    Magic!
Some cosmic mathematician ascribing value, counting the countless variables present in the chaotic system.
    Earth is the pond.
    We are the rock.
Changes in a system destabilize balance.
There will be a new equilibrium—
    The dead and barren moon looks beautiful doesn’t it?
Santa Rosa Plateau boasts the finest remaining California bunchgrass

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4 Birnbaum and Cato p. 7 – “The local rock type changes to volcanic rock (basalt), characterized by the dark gray to black vesicular rocks and associated red soil.”
5 Barnett et al. p. 24
6 Cleveland National Forest: Tenaja Falls Trail
prairie system in the Southwestern United States

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

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

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

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

I hope it stays timeless.

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

Freaks and stoners hanging out at the creek

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7 “Our Wildlife”
8 Santa Rosa Plateau Ecological Reserve: Area History
next to the crushed, jagged beer
cans—rusty aluminum verses
   enclosed in stanzas of frayed and yellowed
cigarette butts on a page
   of half-soaked mattress—
in a poem which tells the story of their lives—
They eat psilocybin, drip acid
in their eyes,
knit their memories,
   their narratives together
joint by burning joint,
and evaporate in the moonlight
like the vernal pools…

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

So long.

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

Shallow streams gossip
about the snow and ice
   —whisper fictions
about the clouds.
They know each of their names—

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

   Polygonal basalt columns
   ramble on dryly
   about the changes they’ve seen

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9 Heizer and Elsasser pp. 209-210 – “Among the Pomo and many other Californian tribes, all plants, animals, and natural features (stones, springs) were believed to have thought and feeling.”
10 Armstrong
in a stony tongue
man forgot
when the last of the magic
Evaporated
with the plateau’s pools
one thirsty summer.

III.
The plateau
Is an old woman
With honeysuckle eyes:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Where the dew clings like ants to red manzanita

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11 Heizer and Elsasser p. 210 – “A Nomlaki Indian told one ethnographer, ‘Everything in this world talks, just as we are [talking] now—the trees, rocks, everything. But we cannot understand them, just as the white people do not understand Indians.’”
And the purple sun drizzles gray light on the hilltops

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

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

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

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

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

V.

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

VI.

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

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12 The Resources Agency p. 54 – “Oaks are also long-lived plants, with some trees living for centuries.”
13 Santa Rosa Rancho
14 Santa Ana Mountains
or sucking on honeysuckle
in the middle of the bunch grass.
       Jacob doesn’t talk much,
       but he has a lot to say.

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

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

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

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

¹⁵ Cleveland National Forest: Bird List
¹⁶ Skalsky
You shouldn’t be alone
In Snake country.
They say it was a snake
That tricked a lone woman
Named Eve into eating
The cell reception
   So, it’s spotty at best
   And if you get bit
   You’re gonna find
   Yourself in one hell
   of a race down
   the mountain.
   Be careful
   Out there,
   Friends.
XOXO
XOX
XO
X

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

IX.
This shrimp, man. I’m a believer!
The only place in the world
you can find it
   is in the Vernal Pools
on Santa Rosa Plateau.
It’s called the Santa Rosa fairy shrimp—
   It’s got a fitting name.
The pools dry up after spring
and all the shrimp die, right?
But the shrimp’s embryos
(they’re called cysts),
they can lie dormant
in the ground
For hundreds of years,
Waiting for the right weather—\(^{17}\)
   The perfect season—
To grow into adults.\(^{18}\)
   Crazy, right?
Now I know you know this,
but there’s been a drought in California
for five years
   (It’s gonna last 100 years
   The weatherman said),
so the pools are empty now,
covered in shrubs and long grasses.
Man, you wouldn’t know
they were pools
if there weren’t signs
all around shouting
VERNAL POOLS \(\Rightarrow\)
But the shrimp don’t care
if it’s dry like the Atacama—
Don’t care if people never
see them again.
When the rains come back,
man,
and the pools fill up,
    they’ll be resurrected
    and walk on the water.

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

\(^{18}\) Ammenheuser
Works Cited


<http://waynesword.palomar.edu/srprock1.htm>.


