



With the raw, surreal events of September 11, 2001 as the backdrop, *Birding in the Face of Terror* follows two parallel narrators in spiritual crisis who must come to grips with psychological exiles of their own devising. It is an antidote for our age of anxiety, a hopepunk testament of love and wholeness for a culture broken by fear.

BIRDING IN THE FACE OF TERROR

by Waldo Noesta

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BIRDING IN THE FACE OF TERROR



WALDO NOESTA

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PROLOGUE

My name, you ask?

You are dying to know, I can tell.

For I have watched you. I have seen you warring against yourself since the beginning of time, spilling your own blood for the right to call me by the names of your choosing.

Part of you has imagined me as legion, and built a pantheon made of aspects of me, while another part of you insists and swears by the blade of your sword that I am one, and only one. And yet, by that same sword you are divided over which name to call this one-and-only. Either you envision me as lunatic or, in crafting this crazed visage, reveal yourself as so. Neither seems fitting for a species endowed with reason.

So indeed, I am called by many names, and assigned a multitude of numbers.

None of them are true.

Impossible, you say? There are records from other ages that show that I have spoken and given you my true name? And you believe these records based on the authority of...yourself? Really now. Let us dispense with such infantile notions. You have grown too big for the swaddle of your own beliefs.

Oh, but in a universe of infinite possibilities, you say, surely someone has uttered my true name, even if just by accident. But no, not once. And I am neither one in number nor any multiple thereof.

Indeed, you name-callers dwell in infinite, unfathomable space, and that space dwells within you. There has been no time when this wasn't so, nor will there ever be. The potential and possibilities of your universe are indeed limitless. But when you open your mouth to describe me or count my appearances, you confine yourself to a

small box. I am present in this boxy world of names and numbers too, but I cannot be contained by them. Nothing you are capable of saying approaches the infinite.

Consider the number of beings that are alive right now in your world. This number may be staggeringly large on the human scale, but still it is a number. To know me, you must forget all numbers.

Picture the grains of sand on all of Gaia's beaches, or drops of water in her oceans. These numbers added together are not a single step in the direction of infinity. It is equally futile to give me a name.

Ever since human beings began measuring time (which, incidentally, is when it began), you have wondered about my true name, and asked me to reveal my face. I have said many times in different ways: you will see my face when you merely open your eyes. But all of these names you babble, like grains of sand and drops of water before a numberless space, are towers built to reach the heavens -- they all fall short of me.

I am beyond all measurements of time and space. I am before anything was, and beyond when anything will be. I am above up, and below down. I am farther than the farthest conceivable edge of the known universe. I am closer than your heartbeat.

You may imagine that I created you and your world. That is true in a sense, but not in the way you imagine. You cannot push me beyond your boundaries nor contain me in your boxes, and you cannot separate me from what I am. I do not create you like a potter creates a pot. I create you by becoming you, like the ocean creates waves, like a dancer creates a dance. Let go of this crackpot idea that you are spun from a wheel you have never seen. If there were such a wheel, it would be the same substance as you, and you are nothing other than me. What you are is what I am. I spin my own essence into beings of incomprehensible diversity and complexity. I create

these beings from myself. I become them and return into my essence in a cycle with neither beginning nor end. Beings come and beings vanish; they never leave my midst. They all remain Whole within me. I am that. You are that too.

But indeed, if you should see this world as a stage, and feel yourself as a single actor in a cast of innumerable others, reciting lines both familiar and new, acting out your role as assigned and apportioned, you pot of clay filled with the emptiness of me --this is no accident; I have made it so. Be this small person with a name, and a number of one among many, and be not alarmed by it. Step into the disguise that makes your character the unique being it is. Grace the stage with your singular presence. Feel the contours of your person --the particular mask you wear, all the concepts and thoughts and emotions that comprise your own personal costume. Be at ease, comfortable in your character and its role --at least for the moment. There are no bad parts in the whole production, and you were cast for yours with a sense of purpose.

And in this great drama I too must become like a character, an image you will recognize. It will at once make you mindful of me and yet forgetful of my true imageless nature. I must hide behind this image that fills your sight, like the boundless sky disappears behind the fog, like the whole world behind your closed eyelids.

This image of me will appear to you time and time again throughout the drama, in many different forms. It will stir something deep within you, from a dimension of your being that you shut down and forgot in order to focus on your role. Then the play takes a serious turn. Your comfort will evaporate, for the image of me will bring fear and trembling. You will believe that every actor eventually leaves the stage and never returns, and that I await you behind the curtain to condemn you for your poor performance. Terrorstruck, you will twist

and sweat under your mask and scream silently as you search in a desperate rage for ways to affix yourself to the stage.

But no, my appearance has a different purpose. For I will be there on the stage, in the form of your image of me, always challenging you to choose a different path to immortality: to put aside names and numbers, open your eyes, and feel my infinite presence. What seems like two different things at first, the image and the presence, you will learn to see as one, but the former must first lead you to the latter. You will either shun me because you love your minuscule role to distraction, or follow me because of an inkling that you were once something much greater, and that I know the way back to you.

So, for this moment, lose all concept of names and numbers. Stop searching for me, and feel my presence within your being, in the space around you, in the plentitude of things your senses are bringing to you right now and all your thoughts about them. Feel the ecstatic nature of my being within you, within all of creation, because I love to be what I am, and I am to be what I love. For I so love you that I have given you the chance to lose me in your own mind, and feel the exhilarating joy of rediscovering what you never really lost.

But you cannot know this yet, not with any certainty. Therefore, for the sake of the drama, forget this moment of illumination, but do not lose it. Obscure it behind the translucent veil around your mind, but let it be a dim beacon in your heart, and carry this inner light always.

When you see me --that is, when you open your eyes-- forget my true identity. But not completely. When you give me a name, call me as the Rastafarians do. Call me I and I. This will remind you of that faint inkling, and provide a clue as to why, when you look out at that vast multitude of beings and things with their own names, you

cannot help but feel something of that greater self that you truly are within every one of them. It is all I and I.

The wise among you know that the purpose of creation is to tell a story. A single story, told from a multitude of perspectives. To write it in words would be impossible. It has been said that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written to tell my whole story. Theatre is the preferred mode of storytelling, for this is where the universe's flair for drama is let loose and given free rein to shine, unbound by the structure of words.

This is the nature of the play as a whole. Within the whole, there is a virtually endless web of interwoven mini-dramas, stages within the stage, where the stories of individual perspectives are played out through the eyes of all sentient beings.

Most of these dramas come and go unnoticed, other than by me. A rose blooms because it blooms; it needs no reason why, no audience to approve. This is the source of its perfection. But you, who are so given to search for Why, you are perfectly imperfect. Humans are storytellers by nature and brilliant actors by vocation. I cannot hide myself from a rose; it knows me all too well. But you humans, with your intricate masks, sacred names and numbers --so prone to forgetfulness! How easily you lose all sense of yourselves as actors playing these roles on a stage, so absorbed as you are into every character. And how mightily you struggle to learn anything of me, your most basic truth! I needn't do nor say a thing to damn you --you trap yourselves within your own lidded eyes.

It is also this very damnation that makes you the most favored of thespians on this stage, for while no being is further from the truth than the human, neither is any more motivated to seek it. Indeed, there is no reason why your continued survival as a species makes

one iota of sense, other than that you have perfected the art of forgetting me and searching for what you think you lost.

Human dramas are also easy to recognize as analogies of the whole, filled as they are with the most vivid enactment of that elemental struggle. You get the honor of telling the untellable story of the whole by allegory; your tales mean something much bigger than they are, and that fills your stages with an electric urgency unknown to the rest of creation. Spring comes, the rose blooms, the grass grows by itself, effortless and free. But to watch you wriggle and writhe under your masks, bound in your self-made shackles, and deploying your cunning means of removing them by wrapping them like a noose around others --who wouldn't grab a front row seat for that?! It is no wonder why yours are the stories that are preserved to share with others across time and space.

The most treasured of the stories preserved by the tradition of human storytelling, however, are not these tragicomic farces that fill your history books. They are tales of remembrance --stories that use their allegorical significance to chart a course by which a being may come home to me.

For you to recognize yourself as "I and I" while still being "you:" this is the triumph to which all life secretly aspires. When this secret is unveiled, the shackles fall of their own accord and a storyteller comes home, there are reverberations throughout human awareness, and new generations of storytellers will reorient themselves around this course.

It is such a tale that I am here to tell now. This is a story of connection and remembrance, of a search for home.

This is not a particularly important story, at least not as importance is generally measured on the human stage. No persons of renown will make an appearance here, and there are stories of far greater magnitude that will play out this very day. But for those interactors who tread this stage, whose stories are involved in this one, it may be of familiar interest. There are many, many such actors, and the stage is set for a grand homecoming.

For those among you who desire to feel the full breadth and significance of this homecoming, it is essential that you forget that I am the only storyteller --but again, not completely. No matter whose voice is narrating at any moment, hear that voice and that alone, but also know that I am with you always, never far from the fore of each scene. And if you begin to suspect that each voice in the story is my own (not to mention the silence of the stage set and all the props), you are on to something; follow it to its rightful conclusion. For truthfully, I say unto you, there is none who sees anything but my roving "I" that sees all, one being at a time.

Right now, for instance, I am New York City. I am a living, breathing organism comprised of many elements. I am a stage made of land and water and air where a great, broad river flows into an ocean. I am a manmade infrastructure of massive scale, comprised of buildings and thoroughfares and hidden networks of conduits moving all the energy and fluids essential to my inhabitants. I am many millions of humans and countless other beings, all coming and going with every moment --the constant cycle of life and death, the patterns of migration as I swell by day and contract at night.

(How can a city be an organism, you may ask, when it is defined by arbitrary political boundaries? But can anything more be said of any organism? Is there any living body that is not a temporary confluence of many millions of cells, interacting with each other via a natural infrastructure that requires constant migration and

interchange with its surroundings to survive? With its essential structure coming and going with every moment, what can the organism call its own? Its fundamental "self" is a political arrangement with its surroundings regarding what it believes it can control and what it is willing to trust to "others" --can anything less be said of New York City, and the arbitrary line that separates it from New Jersey? So yes, you human beings are among my most imaginative co-creators. You can incorporate any body you choose and give it political life. I am that as well. You are ever faithful to forget this too, for the good of the drama.)

Some people call me The City That Never Sleeps. In truth, no city ever sleeps. There is always some level of conscious activity in the pulse of a city's lifeblood. But as the world's largest center of commerce, I do have a unique breed of bustle that never ceases, and it is already quite vibrant at 5:25 AM. Trucks from all over the hinterlands pour in through my tunnels and across my bridges to beat the morning rush. Their cargo will feed both my hungry inhabitants and the wallets of a country starving for my money, an exchange no less vital to these communities than oxygen and carbon dioxide to other organisms.

The roving I zooms down to the level of one of my arteries --Avenue of the Americas as it heads north out of Chelsea past block after block of high-rises, like a Euclidian river in a canyon of glass and steel, concrete and brick. Another hour will pass before the sun rises, so the sliver of sky above is the same off-black shade it has been since nightfall. It never gets fully dark here for the steady presence of manmade electricity, from lights in offices above, the pale orange glow of the streetlamps, the 24-hour delis and waking storefronts, and the white headlights and red taillights of thickening traffic below. When sunlight disappears, the city illuminates itself from within, a reminder to the night that it is still awake and life persists under its arching canopy.

I follow the avenue a few more blocks, past the green arboreal oasis of Bryant Park, then turn left on 42nd St into the heart of the Theatre District. Here the glow intensifies, and as I look right and follow Broadway up to Times Square, I see one of the greatest footprints impressed upon Gaia by humankind. Hardly an inch of the canyon here is not plastered with some iridescent monument to the imagination --flashing signs, television screens, enormous billboards touting everything conceivable, words zooming by on giant wraparound marquees telling stories of the day, all clamoring for attention in the world's epicenter for being seen, an open-air shrine to humankind's worship of itself.

Now, in this moment, I am aware of an event that happened here just over fifteen years ago. There was a woman standing on the sidewalk, scanning the scene around her with great interest. (I see this as though it were happening now, because from my perspective there is no difference. But on this finite stage, it happened in the past, and her appearance now is more like an apparition than a living character.) She was an eighteen-year old farm girl from Middle America, and this was her first time in New York City. She wandered over from the Port Authority bus station because she wanted to see the place that had emblemized the city in her childhood dreams, and there she was in the heart of it, seeing with her own eyes, loving everything she saw. It should be noted that she was one of the very rare human beings who was taught to perceive I and I from the moment she could form a concept of herself, so she was more inclined than most people to fall in love with a billboard or a neon sign, or a pigeon, or even a stranger on the sidewalk.

The living memory of her fades from my attention, and she disappears from this stage. She will return later.

Now, without any time passing, I pull back from Times Square and the political body called New York City. I cross the manmade line into the adjacent political body called New Jersey. Then I zoom in,

through layers upon layers of being and boundaries, some collaboratively chosen, some subconsciously assumed, until I look back out at the universe through the eyes of an organism that is roughly concurrent to a single human body, lying in a bed inside a suburban single-family home.

My eyes are covered by eyelids, so there is not much to see just yet. I am only half awake, and I am wishing that I could go back to sleep, but the wishing is interfering with my wish so it is to no avail. As usual, I woke up at 5:00 with my wife's alarm. She is in the room next door, performing her morning yoga routine. In three hours, she will be in her office in the city, doing a job she loves. I will probably be inching forward in commuter traffic, wishing I were headed anywhere *other than* my office.

I open my eyes, briefly. A faint hint of light crawls under the bedroom door, along with my wife's bizarre Tibetan throat chanting. She would love for me to join her, or at least feel inspired to do *something* to greet the day. I am aware that there is an elliptical machine in the family room that I bought last winter and have used three times. It crosses my mind that I could get up and start a new morning routine for myself. But I roll over on my other side and close my eyes again.

If I were thinking that today might be the last time I will ever see my wife, I might choose to spend every minute with her that I could before she leaves for the train. Instead, I am wondering how the hell I ever got hitched to a morning person.

I will introduce myself later when I am more fully self-aware....

Now I pan back again as cognition departs this individual for a few minutes. I cross the continent. (2,913 miles, a considerable time-distance to cover on the human level, not even a fraction of an eyeblink for me.) I zoom back to a level just above the human

perspective, entering a small house near the ocean in California. It is the same moment, but three hours earlier on the clock, or 2:25 in the morning.

A man and a woman sleep together in this room. I will call the man Pedro; this is how he is known in California, except by his wife, Nadia, who calls him by a secret name of their own making. Pedro is called something else by his family and friends back east, but he does not like that name so I will not evoke it here. I do accommodate the whims of the human ego, for it is instrumental in your perfect ability to forget me. The drama of a single human, played out on its own unique stage, is of such little consequence to the whole story that no isolated plot twist or character development is off limits. But as an allegory for what is happening on the stage of the human family? Oh my, to follow the path of the individual ego is not unlike watching an entire species perform a tightrope act without a net, the fires of hell below on all sides! Or so the audience and actors are led to believe. This is the beauty of the universal drama as perfected in the human experience: Life, which is cyclical by nature, seems like a razor thin line across a pit of oblivion in which every choice, every action is of grave consequence. In reality, they have no greater impact on the actor than what she does on the stage before the curtain falls and she sheds her character like a robe.

A wise human wrote that "every one of us is followed by an illusory person: a false self. This is the man I want to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him." ("God" is one of your more popular concepts of who I am.) This is true on the human level, for God, though infinite and eternal, is thought to have dropped you into his finite and temporal creation and set you loose, recusing himself of any responsibility for your actions as you run amok, chased by shadows that he does not acknowledge. Only the most adept God-seekers catch this contradiction and realize that this shadow, the human ego, is also one of my characters, and even the

most vicious, loathsome characters torn in two by inner conflict are me in disguise.

So, Pedro can have this false self, a minor indulgence of his ego. There are far greater issues on his agenda today.

Right now, Pedro is in deep sleep, experiencing rapid eye movement for only the fourth time in more than a month. He is dreaming about a garden, on a farm where he used to work but is no longer welcome. The garden is exceptionally lush with greens made of emeralds, huge ruby tomatoes and golden squash. As Pedro walks through this garden, he sees God making beautiful, intricate patterns in the soil with a rake. (He knows this is God because it looks exactly like the cartoon images of God he had seen in Playboy magazines as a kid.)

Pedro looks perturbed. He asks God what is the point of growing beautiful gemstone crops that no one can eat, but God does not answer him.

Pedro asks what is the reason for this frivolous artistry that no one will ever see, when there is so much that needs to be done to improve the state of the world. Still no response.

Then Pedro throws up his hands in exasperation and says, "Do you even listen to our prayers anyway?" God just keeps plying his rake to the sand like a Zen monk, absorbed in his detachment from world affairs, his back turned to the inquisitive human. Pedro turns and walks away in disgust, more bitter and alone than before. He does not realize that this particular manifestation of God is a deaf mute, and he is so because Pedro, inspired by one of his favorite fictional characters, has secretly longed to be one for years. Ask and ye shall receive. How many times do I have to tell myself that before I understand?

But all is not lost for Pedro. At least he still dares to dream of God, something many of his fellow death-defying tightrope walkers stopped doing long ago. And he is about to wake up anyway.

I will soon disappear. I will zoom into Pedro and tell most of this story from his perspective, completely forgetful of myself until the time comes to remember. Meanwhile, it should be noted that today's date is September 11, 2001. This is not an ordinary day on most stages involving human beings. There is no such thing as an ordinary day of course, but it is extremely rare that so many characters are aware of this at once. Interesting times will soon be upon us.

Here comes the alarm. Places, everyone...

Act I

2:30 AM Pacific time / 5:30 AM Eastern time

buzzer

Buzzer

BUZZER! I reach across my body and slap the snooze button with my right hand. The sudden motion simulates that too familiar feeling of waking up with alcohol in my blood stream, and I steady myself on my left elbow while the headrush passes. My eyes focus on the fuzzy crimson digits of the clock until they form numerals and make sense. I collapse onto my back and stare at the ceiling.

Only four hours. Goddamnit.

How long can I keep this up?

Quick math...half-hour to the bus yard, another half-hour to Santa Maria...no time to snooze. I burned all the lag time last night. This is the deadline for me to start this gig on time. I do need a couple minutes though to gather some strength. Gravity is very strong in our room this morning.

Blah. I am so thoroughly unrested.

My body doesn't know whether to consider this early today or still late from the day before. Driving a bus for a living has destroyed any functioning internal clock I had left after five years of long-haul trucking and a lifetime of mild insomnia. Each schedule differs from the day before, and in the past seven months I have reported to work at every hour of the clock at least once. So a 2:30 AM wake-up call is not unusual, in the sense that the unusual has become routine.

Nothing really prepares a body for this however...I lie in bed for a while, trying to cut through the grogginess enough to move. Nadia is next to me, lying on her stomach. She has not stirred at all. Apparently, it is too late/early for her to be bothered by my alarm. That is a relief. She can use the rest. This was a rough night even by our low standards.

The last time we sought marriage crisis intervention, a wacky Catholic woman at the counseling center gave us each a laminated card with Ephesians 4:26 printed on it: "Be angry, and sin not; let not the sun go down upon your wrath." We were supposed to promise each other we would remember this verse and never forget to apply its wisdom when we were having trouble. Well, since then I would guess we have sinned more nights than we've sinned not.

Last night was typical. I got home an hour later than expected from a South County wine tour. Damn tourists just had to add that one last stop at Phantom Rivers on the way back to town. Nadia was too upset to eat the dinner she had cooked for us, and that made her blood sugar level drop so low that she had to take a glucose pill, which gives her uncontrollable shivers no matter what the temperature. While dealing with that, covered in blankets and hovering over a space heater, she told me in very loud and not the least bit uncertain terms that her endocrinologist was an asshole for calling her out on not recording her glucometer readings, and the ophthalmologist suggested she might need a second laser procedure on her right eye to clean up the scar tissue from the first one and prevent further vision loss, and the last set of oil pastels I picked up were cheap, crumbly garbage that she couldn't possibly use to do anything decent. (All of this, by the way, was my fault.)

It is best if I do not speak at all during these onslaughts, I have found, so I usually try to listen as dispassionately as possible and

keep all judgments to myself. This time I told her the doctor was right.

The night ended with me sweeping up the contents of dinner, plus a couple shattered ceramic bowls and coffee mugs, from the kitchen floor, and Nadia yelling something about how I never listen to her.

She finally passed out from screaming into her pillow around 10 o'clock. This left a precious half-hour of alone time to type the day's handwritten changes to my manuscript into the word processor. This particular story exists only in the farthest reaches of my mind, and to lose even a day of contact, it seems, is to risk never getting back there, so I guard my daily writing time at all costs, no matter how brief or how basic the task I can accomplish. Nights like this, that means pure transcription. By 10:30, with the window for sleep dwindling until it was just a long nap, I gave up and logged off, ruing the day five years prior when I saw the shy chalkboard artist from the natural food store smile at me from across the room of a Pennsylvania diner.

But all that is behind us. I watch Nadia sleep in the soft crimson light emanating from the nightstand. Her face looks as peaceful and unscathed as a baby's. This is still the image of Nadia I carry, a vision of innocence and beatitude that emanated from the saint-like way she tried to carry the cross of her disease when I was getting to know her. Only later did I learn about the dual poles of her personality, the real Nadia who oscillates from moment to moment between this sublime acceptance of her fate and hysterical rage and fear.

I have also learned how well-founded those fears are. Diabetes rarely acts alone when it tortures. The co-conspirators include every system where proper blood circulation and hormonal regularity are crucial, from neural activity to eyesight to the cardiac system to

thermal regulation --literally everything from head to toe. Aside from the long-term high risk of stroke, heart attack, and amputation due to gangrene --all of which are caused by chronically high sugar levels-- there is the day-to-day danger of stealthy low sugar reactions that zap her mental capacity to respond, or worse, creep up on her while she sleeps. Living with a brittle diabetic has taught me to sleep night after night with one eye open, praying I won't close it inadvertently and wake up to find Nadia lying on the floor in a puddle of sweat, unable to speak or move any closer to the medicine cabinet, slipping toward hypoglycemic coma (that was one of our honeymoon nights). I do this knowing that in exchange for my vigilance, I will be subject to bursts of unresolvable wrath on a regular basis.

And yet, she is still alive, and we are still together, because hidden inside all that human rubble is the most beautiful, resilient spirit I have ever known, a true artist in the supreme sense. It is Nadia who has taught me everything I know about what it is to love another person for exactly who she is, not for who I wanted her to be.

The dread thought of not being around when that spirit lifts itself from its corporal prison and takes flight, be it for an hour, a day or a lifetime, she has told me, is what motivates her to keep going. Maybe that is the case for both of us.

I gently kiss the back of her head, her soft auburn hair. Then I peel myself off the sheets, and stumble toward the closet to fish for a relatively unwrinkled shirt to bring into the shower.

I'm curious what's in store for today. This was a last-minute change to my schedule, and all I know is that I must be in Santa Maria at 4:30, take some folks up to the mountains northwest of Los Angeles, and have them back in town by 5:00 PM --a solid 15 hour day by the time my work is done.

I ponder this as I prepare for my wake-up ritual. That ought to bring in some decent tip money. I'll take Nadia out for sushi tonight. That place down in San Luis Obispo with the Elvis museum. Best yellowtail in town.

Possibilities are starting to unfold. The road energy percolates within me, slowly out pushing the fatigue as cold water hits my chest. Maybe I can do this after all.

3:15 AM / 6:15 AM

I step outside into the mild chill of a late summer night. The protest of my senses against awareness and alertness is mostly quelled, though I'm still fighting an urge of my overworked eyes to stay closed. It is always a tougher sell with them before the sun comes up and the visual joys of the road are still hidden in darkness. The eyes get paid in a currency other than money.

Pacific waves crash on the beach a couple hundred yards away. I pause for a bit, absorbing their timeless rhythm while I lean against the hatchback of the Civic, a slight land breeze from the canyon stirring the moist ocean air. I know I'm running a bit late, but I need a moment with these waves. Nothing else in California gives me such a sense of grounding as when I stand by the shore and let my worries be drowned by the sounds of the sea.

I need the waves this morning because just now, as I shut the front door, I was disturbed by a flashback to a moment not two full weeks ago when Nadia had pushed me past the edge, and in my overwhelming rage I stormed out this door, believing I was closing it for the last time. I am accustomed to a kind of anxiety about *opening* our front door for fear of what I'll find inside. But this is new to me, this wondering if I have what it takes to stay.

A bit of personal history should help explain. Nadia and I are both east coast natives, though I hesitate to call us "transplants." We came to California as part of a cyclical migration pattern I established years ago in my first effort to get as far away from home as I could by land, as far as possible from the desperate, drug-addled, hyperactive mass of humanity piled upon itself in an unbroken pandemic sprawl from New England to Virginia. I once heard the tendency to bounce back and forth between the east and west described as "bicoastal disorder." Some hypochondriacal side

of me must have enjoyed having a malady to blame for my dysfunctional behavior, so it stuck.

Nadia may have recognized something of herself in this disorder, and she hits the ground running as eagerly as I do. We travel well together, perhaps because we tend to be chased by unique but similar kinds of shadows that stay attached to us at the heels rather than disappear across the miles. I do feel that my pace is exhausting her more with each move though. California is our fourth home in five years, and none of the moves were fewer than two thousand miles. Now, having turned our backs to the homeland one more time, we live out here in a present without a past. We have no roots, no sense of place deeper than the eyes' pleasant sweep of the fabled "golden rolling hills." And so, like tumbleweeds across the desert we were blown by an odd wind to the western edge, and now we have come to rest along this Pacific coast because there is no more land.

Well, Nadia has come to rest. I haven't. That is why I drive a bus.

There is some method to the madness though, a discernable pattern that has emerged in my bicoastal tendencies. I head to the West when I feel stifled, craving its open spaces and open minds. But I never feel like anything more than a sojourner here, for something in these spaces only fuels my restlessness. I want to see it all, be everywhere at once. I grow very dissatisfied with being confined to a single human body, and I turn to the closest approximation of escape I have ever known: incessant motion. Soon the futility of this begins to weigh on me and I decide it might be good to just be me again...but can I turn around and head "out East?" Over and over I've tried, but going east always feels like a retreat, a step *back* into the past rather than forward. Life becomes too cloistered, too settled and rigid, like old ruts on a country road. Then the claustrophobia sets in again, living people become like zombies,

memories become ghosts. The itch for relief and release back into the wide-open spaces returns...and so on and so on, ad infinitum perhaps.

I have always wanted to meet someone with an equal but opposite bicoastal disorder, a West Coast native who ran away to the East, and find out if he or she ever says "back West." I have always considered this counterintuitive. Historically accurate or not, America imagines itself to have been born in the East and grown westward, that our past is "back East" while our future unfolds "out West." We see it physically in the path our sun takes across the sky, and perhaps we instinctively follow it. This could perhaps be East Coast bias, but I feel like I am tapping into a cultural truth here and not merely a personal one. Maybe "venturing east" is contradictory to the American mythos, and an Easterner like me is bound to turn toward the rising sun when the urge to cease the adventure and go home arises.

But this time, I came determined to break the pattern, stake my claim and make my life here on the West Coast. We have come to a long-prophesied place where the Santa Lucia Mountains meet the sea in the most spectacular manner I have ever seen, the most magical place I could imagine.

This vision was planted in me on a family vacation when I was 13. We were all packed into a passenger van heading down Highway 101 from San Francisco, sightseeing with my relatives from Nevada. I was every bit the cliché bored teenager lost in his own Walkman world, a soundtrack of early 1980s punk blaring in the fore as the Salinas Valley and Monterey County flew by mostly unnoticed.

Then we took a detour from the freeway, heading west out of Paso Robles toward the Pacific Coast Highway. This piqued my interest. After all, this would be my very first view of the Pacific, and to a 13-

year old boy from the East Coast, California first and foremost means airbrushed pin-up poster models in bikinis on the beach.

But something else took hold of me as we climbed past the hillside vineyards, bishop pines and live oak groves, traversing those last crumpled masses of land that wear the sun baked air and salt water aura of *Eureka!* so unique to California. There is something about knowing that a whole continent is about to bow before the ocean's majesty and the end of land is *just over there*...then we crested the ridge and there it was. The culmination of three thousand miles of unfurling earth, the great Pacific Ocean spread before us, about ten miles out and 2,000 feet down below, shrouded in summer's mist. The land below us leading to the coast was a dazzling expanse of rounded velvet hills and arroyos, smoothed by millennia of sea breezes and the golden blanket of tall grass and wild wheat, punctuated here and there by juniper and cypress trees and the distant specks of grazing cattle.

The headphones came off, and I was pinned to the window. It seemed like a landscape from the pages of a fantasy book, like something Tolkien might have dreamed up on an Ecstasy high. I had the palpable sensation that we were flying as we coasted down the slope, my waking eyes scoping the voluptuous curves of the hills, feeling the road caress them, unfurling up and over and around and down. I was not bound up in a metal box anymore, but expansive and free as I became what I saw. I couldn't explain it then and I hardly can now. All I know is that a lust entered my body at that moment, one that I have spent the rest of my life bent on satisfying: this strange angelic sensation of relating to the solid ground of this earth as if it were the very firmament of Heaven.

The place where we landed on Highway 1 is just up the road from where Nadia and I live now, sixteen years later, in the town of Cayucos. It has been described as a beach town taken out of a time

capsule that was sealed in Southern California in the early 1950s, the living memory of a simpler time when a day's concerns centered on catching a fat wave, not a stray bullet. We were lured by the charm of Cayucos from the moment we arrived on the Central Coast, and it took a whole chapter's worth of toil and tears, but after nearly a year of subsistence living on the fringe, we finally found an affordable bungalow apartment on the edge of town. It was just half of a tiny ranch-style house, part of a cluster of similar dwellings tumbled like dice into the gully of Old Creek, just upstream from where it trickles into the great blue expanse of the Pacific. Humble as it was, I treasured our new home like none I'd ever had before. Never had a western home given me such a sense of having *arrived*.

Since then, I have become pretty certain that there is no such place as heaven --not anywhere near here anyway-- and that angels don't dare fly so low to the ground. The California dream is a soul-sucking nightmare for the poor and unlanded, and the stress of maintaining it as a home, financially and emotionally, has zapped my desire to be here.

And now, this flashback. The cut on my right arm healed days ago; the wound within me still throbs. This is something I have not yet reconciled: Why am I still here? Did I not follow my bicoastal pattern and head back East because all hope of finding home is gone? Or is hope still alive, and still living right here on Old Creek Road?

The answer must be waiting for me somewhere around the bend, and whatever I was living for from birth until the end of August doesn't matter much anymore. I am now living to find it.

3:30 AM / 6:30 AM

Thousands, perhaps millions of alarms have sounded across my metropolitan area over the past hour. Most are met with a somnambulant resignation or even hostility. Tuesday, statistically speaking, is the least favorite day of the week among humans, and these are New Yorkers after all. Fortunately, there is a Starbucks location on every other city block, gearing up to fuel a fresh horde of morning commuters with their black magic energy potion. My parkways and expressways and surface streets thicken by the minute, loaded with more traffic than anyone ever imagined they would carry, building to that point where traffic stops its own flow and everyone goes nowhere, slowly.

The Pacific Coast Highway is empty and dark. I could lie down in the left lane and sleep undisturbed for at least an hour. A lone AM-PM service station glows in the void as I pass the Morro Bay exit. Its luminous sign beckons me with the sweet allure of caffeine. But no, I am running too late to stop, even for something as efficient as gas station coffee.

It would almost be spooky, this absolute quietude in a place that is vibrant by day, but I am accustomed to it. My redevye departures always start like this. No other place I have lived goes to bed as early and uniformly as the North San Luis Obispo County coast, and it will be 7 A.M. or later before my neighbors are roused in any significant numbers. Such is life in a place where the average home price tops \$400,000, and maybe half of those are owned by people who don't live here.

This is the heart of California's Central Coast region. We are exactly halfway on 101 between San Francisco and Los Angeles. (Or, as my puritan friend back East likes to say, "between Sodom and

Gomorrah." It was part of a grand apocalyptic vision he had during a mushroom trip. Personally, I say New York and Washington are the places that should be smote first.)

It is an ideal location to reach both metro areas for my employer, Eldorado Stages. The bus yard is a half-hour drive down Route 1 to the far side of San Luis Obispo, past all seven of the Seven Sisters -- ancient volcanoes, now plugs of igneous rock jutting up through the golden grass of the low coastal foothills-- and several other landmarks I have come to know intimately through this job, now blanketed by the night. I can give a nifty tour of this area in daylight hours. Much of the work at Eldorado serves the local communities and caters to people's desire to be elsewhere: casinos, school field trips, amusement parks and other tourist traps, all the typical diversions from the day-to-day. But there are also many gigs that involve showcasing the Central Coast region for visitors coming here from other elsewheres. These jobs require an element of hospitality more akin to a tour guide than just a driver. My trainers crammed my brain with more tidbits, trivia and minutia about North SLO County coast than one could imagine possible, and it was up to me to smooth it into a spiel that would keep the travelers engrossed.

It hadn't occurred to me when I took a job delivering people how much more would be expected of me as a social being, the degree of interaction with my cargo compared to, say, paper, aluminum cans, breakfast cereal or lawnmowers. Truck driving is a solitary profession, and the fact that I got into it a couple years after dropping out of college, as opposed to the plethora of service industry options available to non-matriculated former students, is indeed no coincidence. As a trucker, I was told where to go and when to be there, and as long as I did it safely, nothing else really mattered much to anyone. Motor coach driving is a completely different beast, a socially dynamic art of contrasts that I am only starting to understand. While the wheels are turning, my job is to go

unnoticed, blend into the vehicle, ready to help the passengers at any moment, but to speak when spoken to and little more. My needs for entertainment or distraction are nullified. I am two hands on the wheel, two feet on the floor, two ears in the cabin and two eyes on the road. When the bus stops, I take on any number of roles that include not just a tour guide, but a travel agent, a concierge, a baggage handler, and sometimes just a smiling face who is happy that so-and-so chose Eldorado Stages. This part of my job does not come very natural to me. Perhaps that is actually the reason I am enjoying it more and more. Safe operation of a large motor vehicle is not much of a challenge anymore. But crawling out of the shell I grew as a truck driver, pretending to be outgoing and chatty for a few hours, then reattaching my protective carapace on the drive back to Cayucos for a typical not-so-quiet night at home? That takes some practice.

I got into bus driving by accident —literally, I am sad to say. This part of the story begins back East, almost two years ago, in our most recent place of residence, where I *almost* found my ideal home.

Cachés Notch is a small paper mill town-turned-reservation for artists, anarchists and freaks in the mountains of northern New Hampshire, one of those überhip enclaves where lefties like Nadia and me huddle together to escape the reality that we are surrounded by gun-toting Republicans and hillbilly biker gangs. The *Utne Reader* once named Cachés Notch “the most enlightened town in New Hampshire” (which is sort of like being the sanest resident in the loony bin) and lauded it as “6,000 people and six coffee houses” —and, as *Utne* failed to note, at least twice as many bars, pubs and watering holes of various repute, so there were plenty of downers to go with the uppers.

This was officially my longest and most successful stint on the East Coast since high school, almost a full year and a half. But it was in

eminent peril as I had just lost my job as a writer for the local weekly newspaper. Actually, I didn't really *lose* my job, the way that one loses car keys or a wager. It is more accurate to say that I had a job, a very good one in fact, and then, slowly, over the course of weeks, it vanished, never to return, and I realized that there was no reason to come to work anymore. A strange realization if you've never been there: one day you are covering a high school hockey game, or interviewing the mayor or a man who makes sculptures out of trash (or in this case, both), writing stories that earn you praise and build your sense of vocation, feeling like you are back in the groove that you left upon dropping out of college, etc...and the next day your boss tells you that she can't afford to keep paying you \$6.50 an hour and she loves your writing but...

So, I started searching for other work that would keep me close to home. Nadia and I had been married in Cachés Notch three months before, and we felt a lot of comradery with the quirky locals, so we were not eager to leave. But the Border Patrol was the only growth industry in the region. Another tour of duty with a long-haul trucking company loomed over me if I didn't find something fast.

The most promising prospect was the local *quebecois* bus line that ran from Manchester to Quebec City, jumping the border at the top of Vermont. I could take a northbound bus as it passed through town, then relieve the Canadian driver of the southbound bus at the border and begin my daily round trip circuit. I needed to get the endorsement on my commercial license that allowed me to drive a large passenger vehicle, so I gave one of my last \$100 to a guy at the local community college to give me a road test on his bus. When the day of our appointment arrived and he didn't have a bus available, he asked me four or five "what would you do if such-and-such happens" kind of questions over the phone—he even gave me extra guesses when I got one wrong—and just like that I became a legal people hauler.

The bus company did not hire me. I suspect I failed my interview with my extremely limited communication skills. (I am functionally illiterate in French.) But a whole dimension of commercial driving I had never before considered was opened up to me.

Meanwhile, Nadia did some research and found an organic avocado farm in the mountains outside Cambria, California that invited folks to come work the land and acquire skills. I recognized Cambria from my map-scanning fantasy travels as being just north of the magic highway from Paso Robles to the coast. One photograph on the farm's rudimentary website really grabbed me, an aerial view of the spread tucked so neatly into the Santa Lucia foothills, with the rugged peaks of the crest towering above, that it looked like a Chinese landscape painting come to life. The farmer couldn't afford to pay us, we were told, but there was an old custom converted school bus on the property where we could live for free, and of course we could forage the groves and gardens for food.

How divine it felt for this opportunity to arise! Especially in contrast to northern New Hampshire in early December: the fall foliage was long gone, leaf peeper excitement a distant memory, and for four solid months we would see only snow and lead pipe grey skies, and unrelenting coldness would coat our nerve endings with hoar frost until Easter...ah, but now the gray clouds are gone and bright blue sky abounds. The air on my bare skin is a warm, gentle caress as I walk barefoot through an avocado grove. I reach up and pluck a willing fruit from one of the trees, peel back the alligator skin and sink my teeth into the soft, creamy green flesh, a bite full of concentrated sunshine. This seemed heavenly to us, and the thought of consummating those teenage dreams while making a home in the storybook land of the golden coast was too compelling to turn down.

Plus, I have to admit that Cachés Notch had started giving me some subtle nudges that suggested it was time to move on. For one, I was spending too much time, and way too much of my liver's life span, in those watering holes. There are also some downsides to settling down in one's home state --for instance, the expectation of my parents that I would be available for all of the family events I had deftly avoided for ten years, even though I was still more than two hours away by automobile. It was an unexpected blessing to find myself wanting to lay down roots there in a familiar niche, nestled between granite crags in a valley guarded by giant white pines and sugar maples, and sharpened by nature's full-bore plunge into every season. But leaving that safe haven to go anywhere nearby meant coming face-to-face with all the same Eastern ghosts who inevitably catch me whenever I cease to be a moving target. So, settling down was not an option, not even in a place that felt more like home than any I had tried.

In the end, with all the factors considered and optioned weighed, we sold our snowshoes and cleaned out the log cabin, packed up the jalopy, said goodbye to the North Country and headed west.

Before we had even left New England, we met considerable resistance as we unwittingly took off into the teeth of a "Nawtheastah" (I insist on the proper spelling for the local dialect), which is basically a winter storm that picks up a portion of the North Atlantic and drops it on land in the form of snow. *Somebody* up there seemed to be punishing us for uprooting ourselves again. There were times heading down through Vermont when the wind blew so hard from the east that I held the steering wheel cocked at a steady 45 degrees left to stay in a straight line, and if it is physically possible for snow to fall sideways, it did, in huge piles that turned the interstate into a thin track of white between snow banks. Fortunately, no one else was foolish enough to be out there with us and we survived the first night at about 15 mph.

It did not get much better from there as the snow turned to ice farther south. We skidded across a bridge in Virginia, smacking the concrete guard on the left side of the highway. I remember looking straight down into a gorge as I stepped out into the frozen hell to survey the damage, expecting to see a mangled side panel on the Honda Civic. But we had been saved by the fact that at least three fingers of ice on both car and bridge had absorbed the entire blow. With one whole bag of kitty litter and a little pushing, we were back on the road, thanking those lucky stars that were somewhere on the other side of the charcoal clouds dumping all manner of calamity on us. I managed to get stuck again not once but *twice* in our fruitless attempts to find a vacant hotel room that night. That was how we spent Christmas Eve of 1999.

But we caught a break in the weather the next day in Tennessee as the signs started pointing us west, and in two days we cruised from the Smokies past Nashville, across Ole Man River, through an Arkansas night and all 833 miles of the Lone Star State. Before I had fully recovered from a bad case of the shivers due to slopping through the ice-slush of western Virginia in my tattered Timberland boots, we were ordering *huevos rancheros* at a greasy spoon diner in the outskirts of El Paso. The Rio Grande Valley of New Mexico lay before us as I beamed out the window, exhausted yet invigorated. We were sitting on the doorstep of the West, like kids on the edge of a 1.2-million-mile playground. Our snow-covered hovel in Cachés Notch could not have been farther behind us, and all was good in the world.

Our money ran out before the land did. We swung down to the border in Arizona and visited old friends in our most recent western outpost, the one we left to try laying down roots in New England. We stayed a day too long and played a little too much. Then we cleared out our storage bin in Tucson (having simultaneous self-storage units on opposite sides of the country is a symptom of

bicoastal disorder) and hit the road. I soon realized we did not have enough gas money to reach Cambria. We holed up at some Sonoran Desert fast food oasis with nothing but fumes in the gas tank, sleeping in a truck stop TV room, waiting for an emergency loan from Nadia's father to show up in the savings account.

Once it did, we rolled confidently into California, past the dizzying expanse of Los Angeles, up the 101 through a sunscape of surf and vineyards and our first mesmerizing views of the Coastal Range, and into San Luis Obispo by sundown on New Year's Eve. It struck me as an impossibly cute and vibrant college town, a palm-dotted mecca for hikers, bikers and sun-lovers of all stripes, the quintessence of what a California hometown should be. Nadia, who had also grown weary of the bone-chilling weather in our boreal hideaway, was opening like a flower in spring and loved everything she saw. *This* was finally going to be the place for us, she insisted, and I couldn't disagree. We rang in the new millennium with showers and pancakes at the local hostel, and then set sail up this last stretch of Route 1, the once exotic pleasure cruise through a *ménage a trois* of road, land and sea that is now my daily commute.

I often think back to that feeling of optimism as I cross the same ground, less than two years later but a lifetime's worth of hard lessons absorbed by a mind forced to age too quickly. How did it fade away so far and so fast? Like another well-known "ye of little faith" tale, I suppose, this one involves a mustard seed.

3:45 AM / 6:45 AM

I have just walked into the tiny drivers' room at Eldorado Stages, which is really just a glorified corridor behind the spacious front office. Far from being a relaxing place to prepare for a journey or unwind after coming home, this is a densely packed clearinghouse of company information, CalDOT safety paraphernalia, bus-themed calendars, several years' worth of business files in cardboard boxes, lost-and-found items (and some that are just plain lost), tools and bus parts spilling over from the garage, defunct coffee makers and other sporadically functional appliances, a cornucopia of maps, pamphlets and tourist brochures, and recently, a misplaced soda machine. If more than two drivers report for duty at once, there is not much elbow room.

The first thing I always do is raid the communal fridge. An ever-changing stockpile of goodies —deli sandwiches, juice boxes, sodas, cakes, pudding packs, etc.— always populates the drivers' fridge, and it is free for the taking. Most of it consists of leftovers from the great bacchanalian feasts our customers indulge in on their trips. One group that I took to a Dodgers game, for instance, mostly Latino families connected through employment at a fiber optics plant, brought at least two Costco sandwiches, three bags of chips and a six-pack of liquid refreshment for every man, woman and child on the bus, and they left at least a third of it behind. Only in America.

Today I select two danishes --a raspberry and a cheese-- and a 20-ounce Coke. As I sit down with my paperwork and open the raspberry, I hear the whirring grumble of an automobile, badly in need of a tune-up and new timing belt. It pulls up and parks right outside the office door. With the engine still running, the door opens and Floyd walks in, looking frumpier than usual in his standard-issue NASA white short-sleeve collared shirt and navy chinos.

With the right costume and a long white beard, Floyd would look just like a lawn ornament gnome. He was raised among the rock piles and ranchlands of central Oregon, and given another career choice, he might have turned out more like the Marlboro man. But Floyd has been driving motor coaches for over forty years, and it shows. He has permanent indigo bags under his eyes, and his face seems to have succumbed to gravity long ago --in fact his whole body has assumed the shape of a pile of sand poured onto the driver's seat. Floyd spent most of his career with a company that ran month-long loops across the country. Who knows how many millions of miles Floyd has under that 44-inch belt? When I can get him to wax nostalgic, he has a wealth of great road stories and practical advice, a valuable resource for a rookie driver. But most of the time Floyd just gripes about the passengers and how he is too old for this shit.

Floyd heads straight for his bin and grabs his paperwork, scanning it with his brow furrowed. He shoves it back in with an exaggerated sigh, clearly unhappy with his lot in life for the day. A minute or so passes while I wonder if he even knows I am sitting there, but then Floyd turns to me and bursts forth with an affected conviviality.

"Yo, Pedro! Whaddaya know?"

"Not much."

Floyd turns his attention to the refrigerator, leading his own expedition through the motley contents. It can be hard to tell the magnitude of Floyd's disapproval of anything --it all generates the same staccato breathing pattern and some variation on "*Uy-yuy-yuy!*" pronounced under his breath. It is a habit that has occasionally unnerved at least one of his trainees, because it is nearly impossible to know if one has forgotten to do a head count of the passengers after a meal stop, or if Floyd cannot find his favorite soft drink. This

morning, it is the latter. He mumbles something incoherent to most human ears.

"Behind the meatball grinders and applesauce on the bottom," I say, without looking up. I hear the sound of a glass jar moved over a plastic shelf, followed by the fridge door closing and the fizzy pop of a once-shaken Dr. Pepper bottle opening.

"You *heard* that?" He sounds more concerned than curious, which makes me grin. I have been thinking that I ought to find some innocuous occasion to let him know.

"Yep."

He suddenly seems afraid to move.

"What are you, goddamn Superman or something?"

"I don't think so. Unless Superman also has two wonky knees and a lazy left eye. But yeah, my ears are hypersensitive. Annoyingly so."

I turn to look at Floyd and shrug my shoulders slightly, a mute acknowledgment of the cat now out of the bag. I can almost see him making a mental note to clean up the language of his not-so-private mutterings when he is working with me.

Floyd looks away, absently scanning the laminated posters on the wall with riveting information like Hours of Service regulations and diagrams showing how to properly inspect a Van Hool. He throws himself dramatically into the seat beside me, landing with a grunt. His face has all the pizzazz of leftovers from yesterday's dinner left out on the counter overnight. I can tell that he too was drawing on his deepest reserves just to get out of bed in time for this gig. He reaches for his mailbox and has a second look at his paperwork. It

does not seem to hold his interest, for soon he has let the papers slide off to the side and, as he often does when we drive together, he starts scanning me, intensely, with a strange kind of eye. I have often thought that I must remind him of himself about forty years ago, when he was a young buck and life was simple and spread out before him like a boundless, uncreased roadmap. I feel him trying to tell me something, and I can almost hear the telepathic message: *Don't do it! Don't give your life to this! You'll lose everything else!*

Another half-minute passes, then he speaks in his trademark grumbly western drawl.

"Hey, did I ever tell you you're the whitest looking spic I ever seen?"

"About fifty-seven times since January. But not yet this week, so it's OK."

Floyd smiles and extends a pasty, droopy right arm to shoulder-chuck me, which I accept with a smile.

"So you're going out with them *bird people* too, huh?" His emphasis makes them sound ghoulish, like B-movie science fiction villains.

"Looks like it. I've been reading the itinerary and it looks like a bird-watching group. We're going to Bonanza for some god-only-knows reason, then Azucar Mountain and a campsite in the foothills. Long day, but pretty easy. How about you?"

"Christ, I gotta take 'em to Santa Barbara so they can go to the goddamn Channel Islands." Floyd shakes his head in astonishment at the stupidity of the entire world outside his cerebral cortex. "They're gonna spend two or three hours on a boat, go look at birds for an *hour, tops*, then two or three coming back. Ain'datta bitch!"

This is one topic on which Floyd and I will never relate. Just as nature abhors a vacuum, most drivers seem to despise the downtime that comes from waiting for passengers to do their thing at the places where we bring them. I love the free time. I get more writing done than I do at home, and it is all on the clock. But Floyd would rather drive laps around a parking lot than sit still and make use of his time.

"Well it should be a nice group anyway. Bird watchers can't be too rowdy."

"*Uy-yuy-yuy!*" Floyd's eyes roll to the top of his skull and back. "I never seen such *weirdoes* in my life! I've been taking this group out for the last three years, and lemme tell ya: *all* they talk about, *all day*, is birds. This bird does this, that bird looks like that. Christ almighty, there ain't a goddamn person in this group that knows *nuthin'* about anything else besides birds. Buncha loony tunes I tell ya. Christ I'm too old for this shit."

I am only half-listening now. My other half has moved on to the paperwork. Something caught my eye on the time sheet, where the customer's name is listed. I don't even know if I am interrupting at this point, but I blurt out, "American Birders Association?"

Floyd is uncharacteristically silent.

"*Birders?*" I say, in reply to myself.

"Yeah. That's what they call themselves. Why?"

"Well....in order to be a birder....one must be able to 'bird.'"

"Yeah, so?"

"'Bird' is a *verb*?"

Floyd looks off into space. "I guess so. Never thought about it much."

I have been leaning back in my chair to this point, but I suddenly bolt forward with my elbows on my knees to concentrate.

"'Cottleston, cottleston, cottleston pie.... *a fly can't bird*, but a bird can fly.' It always seemed to make so much *sense*. I never questioned it."

Floyd looks at me like I had spoken Swahili. "What the hell was *that*?"

"A.A. Milne. *The House at Pooh Corner*. Winnie the Pooh sang it. I've always assumed it was a true statement, but now I don't know. Maybe a fly *can* bird."

More silence. Now I know how to shut Floyd up when I need to.

"I gotta look this up." I reach down to the floor where I had parked my ancient army rucksack. It is ten years old to me, and much older to a WWII-era soldier named "Delvecchio." It is torn in a half-dozen places, and made a professional seamstress throw up her hands and cry, but I still use it as a day pack. Despite many comments and admonishments from the unsentimental public-at-large, my wife included, I cannot seem to replace my rucksack. It is the only constant of my adult life.

Inside it I find my red hardcover Webster's College Dictionary, which has only slightly less seniority than the sack, and is held together by duct tape at the binding.

"You carry a *dictionary* with you?"

"Sure. Doesn't everybody?"

Floyd looks away and chuckles, shaking his head again no doubt. I flip through the "B" section until I find the entry for "bird."

"OK, let's see, there are twelve definitions altogether...noun: any warm-blooded, egg-laying vertebrate of the class *Aves*, having feathers, forelimbs modified into wings, scaly legs and a beak.....slang: a person, especially one having some peculiarity.....informal: an aircraft, spacecraft or guided missile....

(Floyd may have gone out to warm up the bus during this presentation. I can't be sure.)

...'the bird,' slang: a hissing, booing, etc., to show contempt made by raising the middle finger...ah-hah! Here it is. Verb: to bird-watch. Wow, Winnie the Pooh was wrong. A fly *can* bird."

I close the dictionary and look up at Floyd, who is back in his chair. At some point he must have decided to play along.

"C'mawn, how can a *fly* go *birding*?"

"Why not?"

"It's too goddamn small! How's it gonna carry a pair of binoculars?"

"True. But I wouldn't be so sure. What about the one from that old Vincent Price movie? It probably could have birded if it so desired. And anyway, what species on earth has better *God-given* optical equipment to observe *anything* than the common housefly?"

Floyd throws up his hands and laughs big. It is good to see such an unhappy man laughing when I play the clown.

"Jesus, it's true what they say about you Pedro. You really are a loony tune. You should join up with the birders!"

"Maybe I will, Floyd." I smile back, to show I appreciate a genuine backhanded compliment. He gets up and makes that sweeping "come along" gesture with his arm.

"Awright, young man, let's go. We got people to pick up."

4:00 AM / 7:00 AM

The time of day which my people call "rush hour" --though it involves hardly any rushing and persists far longer than an hour-- has arrived in earnest. Both Hudson River tunnels are backed up well into New Jersey, while the George Washington and Throgs Neck Bridges have turned from smooth-flowing conduits into hardened arteries. The platform of Grand Central Station looks like a human anthill, and at this moment, several dozen swarthy, sweaty men in identical yellow cabs on the island of Manhattan are laying on their horns and giving someone the bird. Gridlock has been achieved.

After a truncated once-over on the bus, I follow Floyd out of the Eldorado parking lot. We take the back way out of town, down Edna Valley Road to Price Canyon and shoot over to Pismo Beach. It may cost a minute or two, but we tend to start southbound trips this way because Price Canyon is a fun road to drive, a real snakeskin trail with enough curvature to invigorate the senses and let an artisan driver like Floyd practice his craft. As much as he tries to dull and downplay it with his words, Floyd's forty years on the road have made him a master at the wheel. I try to follow his exact path, easing into the curves, sailing through and accelerating as we pull out, all without shifting the center of gravity or nicking a line on the road.

You want your passengers to feel like they aren't even moving, Floyd explained to me once as we were laying over in Tahoe. Every one of them is on vacation. This is their magic carpet ride --let them believe the bus is driving itself. Well, I think his exact words were, "You ain't part of their party, so keep your mouth shut and drive," but that's how I interpreted them anyway. Disappear into the vehicle, become the bus. That is the task of a driver who aims to be superlative.

In the daylight, Price Canyon looks a bit like a broader, more tamed version of its sister road to the north. Santa Rosa Creek Road was the original land passage across the coastal ridge into Cambria, before they built the highway to my storybook land. Now it is a ghostly, seldom-used trail of cracked blacktop for locals in ancient pickup trucks and daredevils seeking a wilder ride than Highway 46. To travel it now is to realize experientially what a hardscrabble life even my grandparents' generation and all who came before had to wrestle from this land. There are places on the western slope where the switchback grades would rival the best roller coasters at Magic Mountain. Down below where it runs along the creek through the dense canopy of overgrown moss-covered oaks, there are spots where the road is simply not wide enough for two vehicles, and with the stark combination of sun, shade and sudden jutting hills, the visibility can be so bad that you can only *hope* there is no one coming the other way. If a person wanted to hide from the world while staying mere yards from the posh reality known to Hearst Castle tourists or Route 1 Winnebago warriors, the land along Santa Rosa Creek Road would not be a bad place to vanish.

It was here that we made our first California home at the avocado farm, about five miles east of town, hidden deep within one of the arroyos just beyond the main highway. It was such primal farmland that even up close, one would hardly notice the formal signs of agriculture. Avocado groves clung to the hillsides in a manner that defied the typical linear layout of large-scale farms. Tucked in between the trees were two terraced gardens in which cash crops for the local grocery store and weekly farmers' market were raised. Water came from a year-round mountain spring not far above the farm, so there were none of the fabled chronic shortages that plague California growers. The hills rose sharply to the north and east, cresting at the treeless ridge of the Santa Lucia Range. Far above, you could watch the meditative swoop of red-tailed hawks circling the skies like airborne sentries. I imagine this spot looked

much like it did before any kind of conquistador arrived to claim it as his own. It was every bit the Eden we were seeking.

The farmer was one of those evil geniuses who lost his marbles somewhere long ago between acid trips and retreated to a hermetic life in the hills. He clearly wished he didn't need other people to run a profitable farm, and his general cantankerousness was a challenge to handle at times but mostly harmless. There was another young couple living in a tree house —New York hipsters with another acute case of bicoastal disorder—and a rotating cast of local characters and stray cats, earth children and black hoodie punks. Together we made up a ragtag crew, but for a while we really gelled and turned out some great produce. Our lives became a nourishing routine of working with the earth, reaping the bounty we had sewn, and playing with like-minded souls on our little patch of paradise. For a while, I forgot all about the urges to be everywhere and elsewhere.

But like I said, the problems all began with one mustard seed. One of our tasks was to seed trays of lettuce starts that would become part of the farm's locally renowned mesclun mix. We were working with red mustard that morning, one of the smallest seeds in the agricultural plant kingdom. We would grab a small pile and hold them in our palms, carefully scrape two or three seeds into each portion of the plastic tray, then cover it all with topsoil.

There was no tangible buildup to Nadia's eruption at all. I only recall the sudden burst of motion out of the corner of my eye, a shriek of horror and frustration, and a black tray sailing through the air, crashing with a sodden explosion of soil and flimsy plastic against the translucent wall of the hoop house. Unbeknownst to me, Nadia's eyes had been doing strange things for a few weeks, inexplicable bouts of fuzziness that came and went. That morning, it took a turn for the much worse, and for the first time, she could not distinguish the seeds she held in her hand well enough to separate

them. This was the onset of diabetic retinopathy, a degenerative condition of the vision for which there is no cure.

Nadia was inconsolable. Loss of vision cannot be an easy thing for any human being. To a person whose soul is devoted to a vocation such as painting, it is the beginning of the end of a worthwhile existence, or so I was told, very loudly, many times in the following weeks. She lost interest in farming, and found ways to back out of work and alienate our co-workers almost every day. One particularly troublesome habit she always had when falling into a long-term downer was to start binging on carbohydrates and comfort foods, things she knew would spike her blood sugar levels and throw off her very tenuous balance of health. When she started driving herself into town to different restaurants instead of eating on the farm, I knew this was going to be one of the vicious cycles, and sure enough her body became sicker with each indulgence, her outlook darker and more desperate.

Meanwhile tensions rose between us and the other workers. The farmer, normally aloof in his perpetual malcontent, started throwing venomous barbs at the freeloaders living off his labor. I tried to work twice as hard to carry the load for both of us, but no one saw that. They only noticed the absence of Nadia.

One day I was laying drip lines in a newly planted carrot patch, and I heard the telltale screams, the crash of something thrown against the metal mesclun wash tub and a retaliatory barrage of profanity. I knew that our time on the farm was over. Apparently, word had gotten back to the farmer that I picked some avocados from a tree that we had been told, for no good reason, to leave alone, and he decided it was all Nadia's fault. I did not bother to get in the middle of it. I just headed straight for the bus and started piling our stuff into the car. We stormed out of Eden in a cloud of plinking gravel,

dust, and indignities, and didn't even bother to look back at the flaming sword that we knew would be there at the gate.

It was a major relief to be heading west on Santa Rosa Creek Road into town, leaving all that hostility behind and knowing we would never go back. But where to go next? Less than \$200 was left of our emergency loan provisions, thanks to the restaurant tabs and extra gas money. This is how we learned first-hand the reality known to generations of California dreamers —the gold rushers, Dust Bowl refugees, runaways and would-be starlets and leading men of Hollywood, endless summer lovers, dharmabums and nirvana seekers, and now the "undocumented aliens" whose ancestors called this land home before it was stolen from them— that believe it or not, you won't find it so hot if you ain't got the do-re-mi.

For all of the popular conceptions of California as the heartland of the hippie counterculture and a place full of people on the go (San Luis Obispo was the home of the world's first motor hotel, or "motel" as they came to be known), the equally true flip side of this is that nowhere in America is the static, conservative notion of private property so ingrained in the culture. There is a pervasive air of social Darwinism, a survival of the most affluent in which fitness is ultimately measured by the holding of property. People are as friendly as can be during the day, but after nightfall everyone on the North San Luis Obispo County coast retreats to some private castle or ranch, and it becomes the loneliest place on earth. It is very different than a place like Cachés Notch where *everyone* is poor, and there is an inherent bluesy camaraderie in being down on our collective luck. I felt the same culture in other bicoastal outposts in the Northwest, where an ethic of socialism validates the needs of the poor to a much greater degree. And even back home in the Northeast and the Rust Belt of the Midwest, there is a sense that everyone is rooted in their neighborhood, their town, or an ethnic enclave where notions of family are expansive and a "we're all in

this together" mentality gives everyone a sense of place. In fact, anywhere that a harsh environment has forced people to band together for basic survival, one finds a degree of community across class levels and social strata, reflected in some element of common space, be it of mind or earth.

But paradise was parceled into private landholdings from the start, from the ranchos of New Spain to the subdivisions of today, and what is "mine" has never been "ours." Even along the dirt roads of Cambria's most inaccessible back country, properties are clearly marked by fences, driveways gated and often surveilled, "NO TRESPASSING" and "NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH" signs posted conspicuously. Whoever coined the aphorism "good fences make good neighbors" was probably a Californian.

That is all fine and good, I suppose, if you like your privacy and feel that you've earned it through hard work. But what happens when you combine this ethic with a highly mobile society, however, is that it becomes all too easy to shoo the poor away, without even considering how they contribute to the greater community. "Keep moving, stranger:" that is the California landowner's response to poverty in his midst. For individuals without the resources to play the predominant economic game of the local community, there is simply no place to be, especially at night. And failure to move on means coping with an existence that is ignored and unwelcome, and in some cases, even criminal.

The first indication of this came as we tried to find a campsite. It was the beginning of summer, and every campground from Big Sur down through Santa Barbara was booked solid. We found out that reservations were made through a system that requires a credit card, a great way to keep the rabble out. On top of that, there were ominous signs all over San Luis Obispo County posting a local ordinance that forbade sleeping in a vehicle. The fine was \$250. For

the crime of not having enough money to rent a room or stay in a hotel, the county threatened to take away our money. The justice in arrangements like that has always escaped me. But the true message had nothing to do with justice, and it was unmistakable: this is *my* piece of earth, sayeth the County, and you are welcome here to the extent that you serve my interests. If not, keep moving, stranger.

But Nadia and I were not interested in moving. There was way too much marrow to be sucked from the life of this place. So, we went outlaw and lived out of the car. We moved up and down the coast to stay inconspicuous, showering in public facilities on the beaches, finding food wherever it availed itself. Some would call this freedom, and we tasted that joy from time to time, but it wasn't true freedom for us because we wanted something else. We *wanted* a place to be. We wanted to matter to shopkeepers and waiters and baristas, anyone who spoke the common language of currency in which we were temporarily illiterate. I checked the papers daily for driving jobs and applied for a few, but my New Hampshire license and lack of a local address really handicapped me. Nadia tried the entrepreneurial route and stole peanut butter, jelly and bread from the Morro Bay Albertson's and sold sandwiches on the Embarcadero. It earned us some gas money and a couple meals, but nothing we did during those forty days in the car ever overcame that language barrier. This was the hardest lesson to accept: that the crushing weight of being poor in a wealthy society is not just about a lack of security or opportunity. It is simply being on the wrong side of that most basic invisible wall between those who matter and those who don't, those who can speak and be heard and those who cannot. This is how one man's California dream becomes another's nightmare.

I had some acclimation to this from prior experience, but nothing prepared me for the intensity of it in California. Compounded by

legal blindness in one eye, it was completely debilitating to Nadia, and eventually she did what she always does when she is desperate enough: she got sick to the point that she needed hospitalization. Pneumonia was the diagnosis. For Nadia, it meant a clean bed, three meals a day, constant care and temporary deliverance from me, and I guess that was all worth it.

4:30 AM / 7:30 AM

We have driven 30 miles south from the yard, arriving in the urban/agriculture-clash city of Santa Maria. Though it still lies in the heart of a rich farming valley that grows all the iceberg lettuce for McDonald's and most of the world's broccoli, the city itself has mutated over the past twenty years into a genetically modified clone of San Fernando or Orange County. The contrast between the two largest communities in this portion of the Central Coast region could not be starker. San Luis Obispo prides itself on "the SLO life," and has local ordinances banning box stores and drive-thrus at fast food restaurants to prove it. San Luis Obispans never tire of berating Santa Maria for its willingness to succumb to California sprawl. As best I can tell, Santa Marians just count their money and ignore us uppity types to the north, where it is debatable which is more impossible to find: a job or a rental unit. But that is Central Coast California as we round the corner into the 21st century. Like the rest of America, we sell our souls to the developers and the corporations, or we get left behind, like an old gold mining town.

We are now parked by the palm-dotted driveway of the Santa Maria Inn. I meet the conference manager, an affable man named Ken. He shakes my hand with a hydraulic crush and slaps me hard on the shoulder, which I don't take as well as Floyd's chuck.

"Good morning! I hope you're ready for an exciting day."

I never know what to say to things like that, and my answers are unfailingly awkward. "Of course. Just hope I don't fall asleep on the way." Ken laughs. He doesn't know I'm not kidding.

I also meet the group leaders for my bus, a couple from Lompoc whose names escape me, as most names do. They both begin with a "B," so I will call them Bird #1 and Bird #2. They are dressed for a

safari, somewhere between Congo green and Kalahari khaki. My first impression, after talking with them for a few minutes, is that she is a ventriloquist, and he is a dummy with laryngitis; she has been double-fisting black coffee since midnight, and he is ready to fall asleep standing in the driveway.

"Good morning hi how are you I'm Bird #1 this is my husband Bird #2 did you receive a copy of our itinerary we want to make three stops first one is off of Route 33 in Bonanza we can show you the way we scouted the spot yesterday then we're going to Azucar Mountain have you been there before it's gorgeous we'll spend a couple hours there and have lunch be *very* careful on the road going up there very dangerous I'm told then one more stop on the way back at a campground pretty easy day we'll be back at the hotel by five 'kay?"

"OK."

I'm glad we had this talk.

The Birds take their one-woman act elsewhere, leaving me to stand by the bus and watch the diffuse flock of birders slowly congeal into a transportable group. This is a lengthier, more difficult process with adults than with children --all the unleashed excitement of a school field trip without the fear of chaperones and official discipline. I also watch Floyd as he works the crowd by his bus, hobnobbing with the very people he dismissed as "loony tunes" an hour ago. Floyd has a vibrant personality he puts on when the paying customers are around, and he is already in midday form. He is especially good with the silver haired set. He becomes every man's best old chum from the neighborhood, and the ladies all think he is a grandpa Casanova, especially the ones with impaired vision. That is why Floyd usually gets the coveted "seniors" runs.

Before long, Ken whistles and booms over the din of the crowd that it is time to leave. I take my seat as the birders begin to board, filing one by one up the stairs to the aisle. I choose my greetings from a pool that includes "Hi," "Good Morning," and "Welcome Aboard," so they do not get stale. Most of the people, who only have one driver to greet, say "Hi," but cordially. They all seem happy and exuberant despite the hour. This is the first trip of the week; much birding lies ahead. I scan the name tags as they pass by. They indicate that this conference has truly drawn a national representation, from Seattle to Maine to Key West to San Diego and all points in between. It is a litany of familiar names, mostly places I have passed through on my way to Somewhere Else, but with enough regard that I carry a snapshot of each in a mental scrapbook, and that the people attached to these places are not total strangers.

I don't always take such an interest in who is riding on my bus. There are many groups for whom the bus is merely a cab big enough for four dozen people, a practical but cold model of efficiency, part of the annoying interval between Points A and B. For these passengers I find myself being only slightly more social than I was to my cargo as a truck driver. But it only makes it all the more intriguing when a truly dynamic group like this comes aboard, and it makes me pause to reconsider what it means to be a hauler of people. On a busy week, I can carry over 250 passengers, each with a life story and a long winding road that leads them together on my vehicle for a specific shared experience. Then, in most cases, their roads diverge and they disperse back into the far-flung world. But for that allotted time, I get to take a vicarious vacation with up to 56 of my closest temporary relatives.

In a very important way, a motor coach is the anti-California of mass transportation, where we *are* all in this together. There are no separate compartments, no first-class seats, and the difference between driver and passenger is only a matter of function. Even if

that function is indeed to simply shut up and drive, I am still doing it *with* them. Not at all like the rolling isolation chamber of long-haul trucks that I gave up when I accepted this job. Maybe I knew instinctively that this was the only chance I would have to satisfy my craving for western expansiveness—to let myself be absorbed into that great wandering tribe of passengers, and let them carry something of me back to the four corners of the earth— while keeping my sanity enough to let me function at home.

In any case, it gives me comfort to know that all of America is with me today. It is a welcome break from the routine of high school football teams, wine tasting tourists from Fresno and old folks getting fleeced for their Social Security dough at the local casino.

5:00 AM / 8:00 AM

After a quick breakfast of juice and muffins is served, we are ready to roll. Floyd pulls out of the driveway first. His silhouette waves to me as he turns onto the boulevard, and I send back a right-handed salute. *Happy trails, my friend*, I think to myself, hoping he can hear.

I start up the bus, Number 477, an old warhorse with three-quarters-of-a-million miles of stories to tell. We head out into the empty Santa Maria streets. They are uncommonly broad and nondescript, like somewhere I might have rolled through in the Oklahoma panhandle. We go north a few miles through the slumbering town, turn onto the freeway for a short jog before exiting to a two-lane highway heading east.

Every bus, no matter how steady a course the base of its frame follows just above the ground, is tall enough to have an unmistakable sway. I have felt it many times as a passenger. If the driver is jerky or erratic in steering, too much of a hurry perhaps, the sway becomes an irritating wobble. The idea is to harness this natural momentum into something that feels more like the gentle rocking of a cradle. Maybe it is the wee hour of the morning, or I am actually in better form than I think I am today, but ten minutes into the run I am pretty certain that all 44 passengers on Bus 477 have been lulled back into sleep.

The valley in which Santa Maria sits is long and narrow, running northwest to southeast. It does not take long before the road begins a steady climb away from the fertile lands by the ocean and into the dry, forbidding Coastal Range. Where the artificial luminescence of urban life enveloped us before, now a sea of twinkling orange dots float in the side-view mirrors. Then the sea, too, disappears as we top the first ridge, and we have reached the Big Empty. In a matter of minutes, we have left man's overburdened, overrun earth and

landed on the moon. The highway follows a dry river bed, a long meandering gully carved by water from winter rains as it seeks its home, in no particular hurry. There are no human settlements along this route for the first fifty miles. For those whose image of California consists of smog-choked cities and parking lot freeways, places like this must seem other-worldly.

No one is stirring behind me now, all is quiet. The bus hums with meditative calm, bathing me in green dashboard glow. There comes a time like this on every long bus journey, all the more so when a portion of the night is carved off to cover the vast distance between places in the West, when the full measure of what I do hits me with epiphanic power and grace. To permit oneself to enter the mental space required to sleep while riding a land-based projectile, hurtling down a strip of asphalt at up to seventy miles an hour through all manner of weather —it seems to me that this requires a kind of trust that would be gradually earned, not blindly given. Yet here they are, those forty-four fellow travelers from communities all over America, all not merely persons unto themselves but parts of a family tree, branches intertwined with others, all dependent upon their survival. There are not just forty-four humans, but a whole interconnected nexus of humanity trusting me with safe passage through the night and day to come.

My mind revisits so many scenes where the skills to make good on that trust were honed: the first days of mangling a 10-speed transmission in the school's training trucks, when I *knew* that I would never be able to drive the damned thing and what did I get myself into; a couple winters later when the black ice of Nebraska taught me how to steer through a skid without jackknifing or fishtailing into the car sliding next to me; the broiling summer day when I tackled the western slope of Donner Pass with a malfunctioning engine brake and I guessed wrong on the gear setting, and learned how to coast with 45,000 pounds of laundry

soap and eighteen smoking hotcakes all the way into the Sierra Nevada foothills; the endless uneventful minutes, staying alert and covering miles while catastrophe lay waiting just inches on either side of two thin white lines. Wyoming has shown me blinding snowstorms in late June and early September; Iowa, a tornado that crossed the highway maybe two miles behind me in the night; the New Jersey Turnpike, rain so hard it was like driving under a miles-wide waterfall, and a lightning strike that lit up the cab with a sizzling purple glow. The memories of it all are burned into my eyes, hands and feet, and they could not forget if they tried.

And then these moments come when the mind remembers that the body knows all of this, and the heart fills with gratitude that a time-crafted gift has been given to me to give to others —tonight, in the form of peaceful sleep.

There is still a gap to cover between Nadia landing in the hospital and me in the driver's seat of this gilded steel Prevost. It is strange how these kinks in the smooth flow of one's life story, like a lost job or a case of pneumonia, so often lead to new chapters that feel nothing less than providential.

Not long after I started visiting Nadia at the hospital in San Luis Obispo, I heard that a night shift nurse named Karen Dayhoe wanted to talk to me. She had caught wind that I was a truck driver. Her husband Ben had an excavating company based in Cayucos, and needed a driver for one of his 13-speed dump trucks. It was unlike anything I had ever done as a driver, or really wanted to do for that matter. But I had crossed a certain vocational threshold where no vehicle seemed too intimidating to master. Plus, hunger speaks a language that does not include the word "no." A couple days later, I was gainfully employed by Dayhoe Construction Company. I was a mover of earth.

The job was amazingly simple. Every morning I showed up at the truck corral just a stroll up Old Creek Road and coaxed one of the old temperamental beasts into starting. Sometimes there would be equipment to move on a flatbed trailer to a new site, but most of the time I just drove to the same spot where we had worked the previous day —anywhere that someone was willing to pay a large amount of dollars to have the ground moved, smoothed, dug, leveled or otherwise altered— and staged the rig where the crew wanted it. There a small fleet of machines would be busy creating piles of dirt and debris for me to haul away to a prearranged site, then dump and repeat, for about eight hours each workday. The whole operation never took me more than 15 miles from home, all within the grand coastline and canyonlands between Morro Bay and Cambria. I loved the ever-changing yet intimately familiar scenery, tinged with that sense of magic I had known since the first time I crested that peak. It was like Storybook Land had hired me to drive for its Public Works Department.

Every day, there were moments when my eyes would survey the landscape, like the morning fog licking the hillsides as it retreats before the sunbaked crystalline California sky, when I would meditate on where I was and what it had taken to get there. A delightful shiver would shoot down my spine, the unspeakable sensation of being in the midst of perfection. Once again for a time I was able to forget that there were roads leading away and beyond, uncharted lands to be discovered and rediscovered.

On top of that, Dayhoe paid me the highest hourly wage I'd ever received for local work. Once again, we were fluent in the local language of commerce. Within two paychecks we had enough to rent a room in a shared house in Morro Bay. It wasn't luxurious, but oh the joy of sleeping without pedals at my feet or a gearshift where my knees wanted to be! About two months after that, with the loan from Nadia's father paid off, we found the bungalow apartment

where we now dwell on Old Creek Road. By Central Coast standards we were still among the peasantry, but we were peasants with a *home*, a place to be, and no castle dwellers were ever more grateful than we.

Nadia decorated the place with her newly discovered medium of oil pastels, which are broader than paint brush strokes with brighter colors more visible to her weakened eyes. I fell into a productive routine of writing for a few hours each night after work while she drew. Three of the best weeks of our lives together, as I recall.

That idyllic world unraveled slowly this time, but the onset of its undoing was no less jarring or out-of-the-blue than a plane crash, on one otherwise ordinary December day.

The job we were doing was a house demolition right there in Cayucos. Someone hired us to knock down an adorable 1950s-era ranch house so it could be replaced by a tri-level condo, and probably triple the value of its quarter-acre lot. I remember walking through the house before we did any work, noticing its different layers of presence. Clearly families had been raised there, with the telltale sign of faded height measurements penciled onto the door frame of the smaller bedroom. This was a place that at least two generations of someone's now-grown-up children must long for when they think of home. I wished like hell that I could buy it and preserve it for them, just on the off chance that I might meet them one day. But dreams like that stand in the way of Progress, so Progress knocks them down.

It had been a routine demo job until that day. We had worked most of the way down to the concrete slab. I was doing some light ground work in between dump runs, mostly clearing debris from a portico area between the house and a small free-standing garage. The crew was clearing the house of the last of its vital organs, while

Ben was working with the backhoe side of his excavator chomping up the roof of the garage. I pulled up some plants at the base of the garage wall and walked them around to the organic matter pile around the side of the house.

All I remember next is a tense commotion of voices, and I turned around to see Ben leaping off his machine. As I got closer, I saw that the garage wall closest to the house, the one that had been above me no more than ten seconds earlier, was toppled and lying on the concrete. Also on the concrete, by the top of the wall now turned to rubble, was Santos "Splash" Rios.

Splash was a Mexican immigrant with almost no English, and surprisingly the only non-*gringo* on the crew, so he hardly ever spoke. He had earned his nickname, I was told, on a scorching hot day when they were leveling the ground for a new driveway on an oceanfront lot in Cambria. At the end of the day, he was having the usual beer and smoke session with the crew, when out of nowhere he said, "*Quiero nadar,*" and proceeded to sprint at full speed toward the bluff in the backyard. He hurled himself over the edge screaming "*Ayyyyyy!*" —I picture Acapulco cliff diver meets kamikaze pilot— and then all that the others could see from their perspective was the top of what had to be an enormous splash. They raced to the edge to find the newly christened Splash floating on his back like an otter, laughing hysterically. He had cleared about five feet of beach and dropped ten feet, and somehow managed to not die. (They were pretty sure he belly-flopped, as it was too shallow for other means of entry.)

Splash's work ethic and skill set for his job were unparalleled. He could grade the slope of a yard, for instance, to the exact degree required using nothing more than his eyes, his hands and a rake. He worked in the manner that I imagine a monk would tend to a garden, absorbed into his labor, completely free of distractions. All

the gossip and bad jokes and sexual innuendo that were volleyed around him from morning until dusk were given no quarter in his brain. How I envied him for that. I later learned that Splash slept on a couch in someone's den and sent almost all of his money back to a wife and children in Cuernavaca, just to complete this picture of a latter-day Latino saint.

On the day that all of this became past tense, Splash was walking across the portico with debris in his hands, right into the path of the falling wall. He was hit by the top of it, the part falling with the greatest speed and force, and slammed flat on his back onto the concrete slab. There was no blood or visible injuries, but he could not move aside from the involuntary spasms of breathless convulsion, like he was being choked by invisible hands he could not grab. Most of his skeleton had been crushed, and his airway was completely severed. Some feeble attempts at resuscitation were made, but there was no kind of CPR that could keep him alive. We all watched helplessly as Splash Rios surrendered the fight for his last breath, and left us on a sunny December day on the California shore.

It was the first time a human life had disappeared before my eyes. The other living witnesses on the scene ran the gamut from disbelief to hysteria to a shocked, sobbing terror. I somehow remained very still, observing. A few memories are etched from those moments...the surprise at how quickly the body changes when the breath is gone, his tan skin turning pale and face rigid like an off-white plaster mask within seconds.

And my first conscious thought: *Where did you go, Splash?*

I don't mean anything so banal as heaven or hell. I mean *where?*... What looked out from those eyes while he drew breath, and where has it gone now?

I had never occasioned to ask those questions before, at least not since a series of terrifying waking dreams about death as an unending oblivion had scared them out of me (or pushed them deeper within?) over the course of my childhood. My existential fears drove me toward a life of meekly cantankerous shallowness that I find typical of people in this era. But then a building collapses, a life just like ours is lost, and suddenly the mind is forced to grapple with questions it would rather ignore.

No answers came that day or soon thereafter, but it *was* the day that I started asking better questions of myself. We can all probably look back at one point in our lives and remember one such person or event that woke us up from the nightmare of feigned immortality. Mine, if you will accept the paradox, was an anonymous Mexican laborer named Splash Rios.

I did not last very long with Dayhoe after that. Asking unanswerable questions may be good exercise for the soul, but for the mind still operating from the confines of a human body, with a reborn awareness of the transience of such, it gets a little harder for a while. The accident happened on a Thursday morning, and we all took the rest of the day and Friday off to calm our frazzled nerves. But Monday we were back on the job. Unfortunately, we were also short our most productive laborer, and that meant that I needed to pitch in on the ground even more in between dump runs.

Some quick background on my physical health. It has been almost spotless in every way since birth. But as I alluded to Floyd, I have one humbling malady that has bugged me most of my life: a pair of genetically defective knees. My kneecaps didn't fit correctly into the groove that nature designed, a minor detail it would seem, but it left me susceptible to knee sprains and accelerated cartilage wear. I went under the knife twice at age thirteen to fix them. While my left knee healed solidly and had never so much as whimpered again, my

right had plotted against me ever since, and a slew of aggravating injuries ensued, all while doing things quite normal to most of the world. It has also been an internal barometer for measuring my stress level. Generally speaking, when my right knee feels stiff and brittle like a plaster of Paris mold, something is not right with my head.

So there we were, my right knee and I, lifting enormous chunks of concrete and cinder blocks and tossing them into the front-end loader's scoop. Barometric pressure was extremely high, and I dragged my right leg behind me, letting my back do all the work. I was the "how not to" model in the construction company safety videos. But in typical male fashion, I was also trying to prove myself to the *real* men who did that kind of work all the time, and the worse my knee felt the more I tried to overcompensate with my upper body.

One Friday afternoon, eight days after the accident, I went to grab a particularly large chunk of the garage floor, and realized I couldn't get it with my back and arms alone. I crouched down to lift with my legs like a good boy. As I lifted myself up, I felt something pop...in my left knee.

Did I mention I was also putting all my weight on one leg? Yeah.

It did not seem that bad at first. Nothing painful, just that queer, something-ain't-right feeling. I noticed it getting worse throughout the day as I climbed in and out of the truck, and loaded some equipment on the flatbed at the end of the day. Not drastically, but enough swelling to make bending the knee feel like something that was not supposed to happen. I was limping on both legs, if that is even possible, but I did not tell anyone at Dayhoe. It didn't feel like a big deal.

By the end of the weekend, as I lay on the couch with the knee iced and propped up, wishing the swelling away to no avail, it was clear that it was a very big deal. Nadia was always a little agitated whenever I got ill or injured. Anything that even temporarily threatened her status as The Sick One in the relationship drew more consternation than empathy from her. I had fixed my own right knee so many times through ice packs and rest that I was sure I'd be back on my feet by Monday, so every hour that I lay inert on the couch with no results only increased the hostility. I slowly resigned myself to the fact that this one was going to call for pills —one for my knee, and about four for my aching head.

When I came into the office Monday morning on Salvation Army crutches to file a workers' comp claim, I became Public Enemy No. 1 at Dayhoe. Ben contested the claim, which wound up delaying payment for the full 90 days allotted to an appeal. It was true that I had not reported it as a work injury as I should have, but he had nothing on me as far as proving the claim was false, because it was not, and he bore the burden of proof. In the meantime, with me confined to "limited duties" (I was allowed to drive the truck, but no groundwork), my workload diminished drastically, and Ben did everything but verbalize that he wished the wall had fallen on me instead. And I certainly did not take the high road in response. I called him "pond scum" in an official document, and insinuated that none of it would have happened if he had not killed off 20 percent of his work force. It was the ugliest confrontation I have ever had with someone not married to me.

And it wasn't paying the bills either. What little bit we had squirreled away over the couple months of full-time income was quickly gone, and our bungalow haven was in jeopardy. The local classifieds were skimpy as always, so I turned to my most effective means of job hunting: skimming through the Yellow Pages listings for trucking companies, food distributors, anyone who had

something with wheels and might need someone to propel it. No one was interested in me, and the anti-inflammatory meds had not taken full effect so operating a clutch was still very difficult. I resigned myself to calling the dreaded temp agencies for desk work.

Then I remembered the special endorsement in my pocket, my license to haul people. I let my fingers walk to the Bus listings.

Two days later, in early January 2001, I limped into the office of Eldorado Stages and met Annie O'Fallon, the most blindly beneficent and trusting employer I've ever had. The doors she would open for me as a novice in the bus driving business were hard to fathom, but open wide they did. Paychecks started coming again, rent got paid, and I...well, for better or for worse, I caught the scent of the road, infused with adventure and liberation, an antidote to the stench of death that pervaded my time working for that Ben Dayhoe.

One might think that having gone through the travails of being penniless and homeless, to what was in most respects the simple home of our dreams, and then to the brink of losing that home, any employment situation that could pull us back from said brink would harken another period of gratitude for our prosperity, and warmth between each other as we were manifesting our own dreams.

It did not. In fact, in many ways, the times ahead were the most desperate of all.

But a smooth empty road swallows despair like nothing I have ever known. All feels right when I am at the wheel, and the troubled nights I leave behind in Cayucos always give way to glorious mornings...and if I tell myself that often enough, I might start to believe it again.

Right now, it is oddly dark in the predawn sky. No moon, no stars, no lights, no traffic, just me and the bus and forty-four birders in peaceful slumber. I feel a yawn coming, but I choke it off and cup it with my hand. It is bad form to yawn in front of the passengers, I have been told several times. Makes them nervous. So I acquiesce, knowing that no one is awake to witness this display of fatigue. If a bus driver yawns, and no one is there to see it, is he still tired?

A sign: 25 miles to Cuyama. Good. We are almost halfway there. The bus reaches a right-hand bend. It drops into fourth and chugs up an incline, headlight beams slicing the inky western darkness.

There is a city to my north, a mere fraction of my size and significance, yet somehow it has the gall to call itself "the Hub of the Universe." Such is the fantastic nature of names, after all. But I digress...The morning sky in this miniature metropolis is sunny and clear, as it is above me as well. It is one of those pristine September days in which our human residents delight, heralding the shift from muggy summer to the refreshing cool of autumn on the Atlantic seaboard.

Into this fair New England sky sails a jet airplane, bound for another city that dares consider itself a rival of mine —"the City of Angels," irony apparently unintended— on the far western coast. Fourteen minutes later, another plane leaves Boston with the same destination. Routine daily departures, unusual only in that flightless creatures take to the air and cross the continent in five hours. This is the marvel of the human imagination, that after centuries of fruitless imitation and envy of birds, the proper concoction of engineering principles would lift a man off a North Carolina island and bring him down where he wanted to land; and more so, that so soon after the Wright Brothers' success, the day would come when thousands of these metallic birds would carry millions of people

safely to places all over the earth, a kinetic web of motion that less than one hundred years ago would have been revered as a miracle.

These two birds will not be among those successful flights. For humans can also imagine their own annihilation, and on the other side of the world, someone realized that a Boeing 767, with a top speed of over 500 mph and a fuel capacity of 13,900 gallons, could be the greatest Molotov cocktail ever made. This person organized a crew of compatriots to make his dream a reality, some of whom hide among the passengers on these planes. For reasons known only to them, they are willing to die and take a small cross-section of humanity with them, and their scheme is about to culminate in my airspace, bringing total destruction to my largest buildings, terror to the hearts of my people.

Within a half-hour of takeoff, both birds have been hijacked and re-routed by trained pilots among the murderers. They are now guided missiles, and their new destination is lower Manhattan.



With the raw, surreal events of September 11, 2001 as the backdrop, *Birding in the Face of Terror* follows two parallel narrators in spiritual crisis who must come to grips with psychological exiles of their own devising. It is an antidote for our age of anxiety, a hopepunk testament of love and wholeness for a culture broken by fear.

BIRDING IN THE FACE OF TERROR

by Waldo Noesta

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