THE WOUNDED WIND

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When I moved to California, I imagined living in a lush, sun-stroked landscape with green mountains and clear creeks that ran into the ocean. My partner, Charlie, grew up in Santa Barbara, and we'd made several trips to visit his family while we were living in New England. California was a place where magnolias bloomed in December and jacarandas blossomed like purple cotton candy in February, where tall palm trees leaned into the salt-breeze off the ocean and giant, stoic redwoods shaded the earth. A place where the temperature hovered at seventy degrees for most of the year and "layering up" meant putting on a sweater or putting away the flip-flops in favor of tennis shoes. I thought we were moving to paradise, a much-needed contrast with the cruel, dark winters we'd endured for so many years.

But we arrived to something different. Instead of lush trees heavy with flowers, we found chaparral hillsides that smudged the skyline gray and brown. The lakes and rivers ran dry and were overtaken with yellow grasses and spiny, brittle shrubs. The sun was constant and unyielding. Our first summer was so hot that scorpions crept into the house to stay cool. I'd find them tucked into the folds of towels or lying flattened under the couch, their thin tails slicing through the air. Rattlesnakes slithered over the stone path to the house and coiled up underneath rocks, seeking shade. At night, the coyotes chased the moon across the sky, their yips echoing through the canyons while they hunted rabbits or the occasional wandering house cat, coming closer and closer to neighborhoods and restaurants in search of water. Our first fall in California, the Santa Ana winds blew parched air through the windows, and nights brought fever dreams of fires roaring hungry over the mountains, chewing up the land and leaving nothing behind but ashes.

Our new home was on three acres dotted with clusters of sprawling oak trees, and all of them were hollow, their limbs twisting over the emptiness. The Jesusita fire had burned their insides—it swept into the canyons five years earlier, embers

carried skyward in gusty winds that blew in from the north. Charlie's mother sent us a newspaper article about the fire, and we read that the boots of firefighters melted to the ground, such was the heat of the inferno that raged through the mountains and foothills. It took thirteen days to contain the Jesusita fire, and by then it had burned eighty homes and forced 35,000 people to evacuate. Charlie knew a couple who'd just bought a property in the mountains, and it burned to the ground before they even had the chance to move in. Which was, in some ways, a turn of luck, though a bitter one—they lost their house, but not their home. It was a structure with nothing inside of it. A tree without its heartwood.

The house that we ended up moving into sustained only minimal damage, because the oaks acted as a wall through which the fire could not pass. Oak trees, we learned, are fire retardant: even as the flames eat through the core of an oak's trunk, the outer bark, which holds the tree's nutrients and moisture, suffocates the fire. The prior owner of the house told us the only thing he lost in the Jesusita fire was a set of wicker patio furniture that he'd kept on the plateau at the southern tip of the property. "Lit up like newspaper," he said, shaking his head.

I'm trying to imagine losing everything. Leaving your home, everything you own, all the things you've accumulated over the years, all the memories they hold. I'm trying to imagine closing the door, turning the key in the lock, taking one last look through the window. I'm trying to understand how the remnants of a life could so easily turn into a smoldering, skeletal frame of loss. When a fire burns too close and the air tastes of smoke, I pace through the house and consider what would happen if I had to evacuate—what I would take, and what I would leave behind.

It begins with a question: What is essential, what is irreplaceable?

The answer is an inventory: our pets, of course, the cat and the dogs. Their kennels and blankets, some food. Maybe a couple changes of clothes for us, just in case it takes a while to contain the fire. But what else? There's a drawer in my desk that I call the drawer of important things—passports, social security cards, and some cash—things I can fit into the small front pocket of my backpack. I can't forget my glasses, and medication; but what about the toothbrushes, what about the floss? Is there time? Are these things you should only buy when you're out of danger?

Most of all, I wonder about the more sentimental items: the finger-painting my nephew made, the shoebox full of film negatives, a chest of old letters, pressed

flowers in the pages of books. What about the rocking chair, the hand-sewn blanket, the sheet music? What about the blue mugs that we drank coffee from every morning, the ones we bought in Maine?

It doesn't take very long to fill a drawer with important things, or a car, or a house, or a home. The challenge is getting over the feeling that you've missed something, that you've left something critical behind.

I got to know the oak trees on our property by the differences in their size, by their shapes and their widths. The oak that stretched out over the roof of the guesthouse was much larger than the oak beside the driveway, which had thin, ropy branches that weren't suitable for climbing. The oak at the base of the valley sprawled wide-limbed over the grasses, its branches combing the ground when the wind picked up, but the oak that bordered our neighbor's property was slender and sparse.

The arborist saw much more in the trees. Past seventy, with withered white hair and a slightly hunched posture, Duke had the appearance of an oak tree himself, and he could translate the stories in the trees. He'd approach a tree, place his hand on its trunk and smile, saying, "Oh she's seen a lot, this one. She certainly has." He knew each tree's approximate age, where they had lost limbs in storms or been over-pruned, what fungi or insects weakened their bark, what fires had ravaged their heartwood. He watched the way that the branches spun each along their own s-curve, twisting out from the trunk, and guessed at the traumatic events that had carved out the angles, the winds that had changed the tree's direction. He reached into the knotholes and ran his fingers along the insides, and knew from touch how dry the land was, what nutrients were lacking in the sandy soil.

Duke explained that a healthy oak is always flexible in the wind. Able to dance in lighter breezes, able to bow low when sundowners gust through the canyons.

"It's the drought that's the problem," he said. "The trees are so brittle now, they break in the wind." He stood over the remains of a fallen oak at the foot of the canyon, its limbs cracked open. Even though the trees looked healthy on the outside, when the wind picked up, they started to unravel. There was nothing we could do to keep them from snapping open. Nothing, except wait for the rain.

Our first spring, we learned that it doesn't take a lot of water to bring the landscape back to life again. In May and June, a heavy marine layer curled in from the sea and finally, finally, the air was thick with dew, and lichen crawled over the branches

like soft, green velvet. For a few weeks, poppies blanketed the hillsides and fragrant hummingbird sage broke up through the mat of fallen leaves on the ground—all from just fog, just a blanket of moisture that clung overnight to the plants and the soil.

When I talk about the rain, I'm not hoping for a deluge, or a monsoon that drenches the land and refills the now-empty lakes. So much rain after so many dry years would cause landslides and flash flooding. But a grey afternoon, an evening drizzle, the smell of the rain in the morning—these are the small miracles I wish for, these blessings from the sky. There are children in my neighborhood who have never splashed in puddles along the sidewalk, never waded through the cold mountain creeks. Sometimes it feels like I, too, am starting to forget. I can barely remember the smell of the rain, that fresh, sunlit perfume of damp grass. I can barely remember the feeling of raindrops dripping down my neck, or too-deep puddles seeping into my shoes.

Duke estimated that the largest oak tree on the property was around two hundred years old. Its age was reflected in the stately silhouette of its limbs, but the number of years alone didn't quite capture the unmistakable presence of the oak, the way it carved out a sturdy home atop the hillside and stood like a sentinel bearing witness to the passage of years. When the prior owner decided to build a deck that stretched over the side of the hill where the oak grew, he built it around the thick trunk of the tree so that the oak became the centerpiece.

There was a knothole as large as my torso right in the center of the trunk, and inside, the tree was hollow from the Jesusita fire, or perhaps several fires over its long life. If you stuck your head through the hole, you could see all the way down to the base of the trunk, where the roots wound into the soil. The blackened inner-basin collected water, forming a tiny reservoir that the tree could soak up slowly from within. Above the knothole, the trunk split into two broad limbs, forming a perfect Y, balancing the tree with weight and counterweight against even the strongest winds.

I put a bench beside the base of the oak and spent early afternoons sipping coffee in the shade of its thick leaves, listening to the different birdsongs that chimed overhead. The tree was alive with birds—woodpeckers, scrub jays and red-tailed hawks competing for space in the shaded branches, clusters of quail tottering and pecking at the ground beneath. That it was so full of life was perhaps the greatest

testament to the role of the tree over time. How many birds fluttered through those leaves, how many built their nests and hatched their young in the cradle of its branches? What lives did the old tree witness, what stories unfolding?

Charlie tells stories about the mountains he remembers, the streams and creeks that once flowed like veins to the coast, foliage that was lush and full, hillsides painted green. Winter used to mean rain, months of storms filling the gutters and soaking the ground.

This isn't the first drought this region has experienced, and when it started everyone assumed the dryness was just the standard ebb and flow of the rainfall, a predictable weather pattern. Some past droughts have been longer than this one, and others shorter. There's a cycle at play, a movement of currents and winds that was established long before humans ever lived on the land. Drought and then rain. Fire and then growth.

Still, even with the inevitability of dry spells, after years of diminishing lakes and little rain, people couldn't help but wonder if this drought was different. Residents of Santa Barbara, trying to do their part, re-landscaped with stones and sand and succulents, drought-resistant natives that could survive the dry air. But it was not enough to bring back the water that was already gone. The oaks in the canyons began falling, their insides turned to dust. The fear is more and more unavoidable—that this may be the new climate here. The cycle of seasons tells us otherwise; history predicts the rains will return. The past promises that lakeshores will lap once more along familiar edges, creeks will run glistening over the sandstone boulders. But where in the history of the land are temperatures like the ones we experience now, the record-setting highs that keep creeping upwards? Where in the layers of sediment can we find evidence that the streams and lakes were completely emptied but then refilled, that such a severe drought gave way to abundance? What used to be a matter of patience, waiting for an inevitable rain, doesn't feel possible now. It feels like this drought will continue, year after year after year, felling the trees one by one and drying up the ecosystem until we are living in an arid and hostile desert—our own inferno.

That hopeless feeling is particularly unavoidable every fall, when the Santa Ana winds gust over the mountains. I grew up in Wyoming, so strong winds are nothing

new to me. On the prairie in winter I remember a wind that rippled over the plains like a whip, a wind that found every crack and crevice, every pinprick hole in a wall or window, and slipped inside like smoke. But the Santa Ana winds are different. They've been swirled in a furnace and they blaze across the mountains, scorching everything they touch. It can be difficult to breathe through the thick and dusty air. Having traveled a great distance, the Santa Anas carry the smell of faraway forests, a faint perfume of cedar and redwood; and also, something bitter, the sharp scent of something burning, of dust and dry air.

The Santa Ana winds set everybody's nerves on edge. The gusts wick moisture from the air, from the trees and the plants, from the soil, from skin—everything feels chapped and exposed. I have heard that the rates of suicide and homicide increase during the Santa Anas. Maybe it's the inescapable heat, the blast of it against skin, the way it dries everything out; or maybe it's that the wind portends an inevitable fire, flames licking the parched air and flying over the mountains, devouring the brittle hedges, lighting up the skyline like newspaper.

NATURE RETAINS AN UNEASY BALANCE BETWEEN DESTRUCTION AND RENEWAL, BETWEEN CRUELTY AND RESILIENCE

Just a month of early summer fog can refresh a landscape, pepper a dusty, yellowed field with new blossoms, help a tired oak tree stand a little straighter against the wind. But these mountains also depend on fire to serve as a catalyst for regrowth. Nature retains an uneasy balance between destruction and renewal, between cruelty and resilience. When a fire starts, the firefighters don't necessarily try to stop it—it's often already too large for that, too unpredictable. Instead, they try to control the direction that it spreads, and how far it can go. There are some places where the fire is allowed to burn. Once an area has burned, it's safe from fires for a while. The fire saves nothing for later.

It takes much longer after a fire than after a rain to see the ways the land has changed, what new life has emerged. We hiked on the Jesusita trail about a year after the fires had raged through, and the path was barely cloaked in soft blue-eyed grass. The new growth was still a light shade of green, not yet browned in the sun, and the leaves shone out against the black and twisted remains of what used to be.

The people who lost their homes in the Jesusita fire rebuilt too, or moved elsewhere. They planted new gardens and watched cacti limbs sprout long stalks with open-faced flowers turned to the sun. Perhaps the things they carried with them, the things they had time to take, turned out to be more than they needed after all. Perhaps there is nothing so critical that it can't be left behind, that it can't be rediscovered later in a different way.

Things are just things, after all. They fade, they turn into something else, they disappear.

Is a tree a thing, like the things that you might want to save in the event of a fire? Does it count, even though it doesn't belong to you, even though you can't carry it, you can't hold it in your hands? That ancient oak tree was a home for so many memories. The late-night phone calls with friends far away, the sounds of the piano drifting through an open window, the quiet conversations over coffee. More specific than that: a woman alone, cooking dinner, washing dishes and turning off the lights. A couple bent over the table, working on a puzzle. A dog running joyfully into the canyon, chasing the scent of a deer and the sensation of dirt on its paws. And these are just the memories I shared with the tree. For two hundred years, the oak tree was present to all of life unfolding, the things that meant nothing and the things that meant everything. That oak tree had buried in the rings of its wood a hundred thousand stories and more.

Duke told me, if you listen nights when the moon is full, you can hear the ancient trees whispering. It's a poetry spoken in the rustling of the leaves, a language you feel in your bones rather than interpret. There is no translation to describe the tree's witnessing of the world changing, no words to capture the long cycles of seasons. There were years of drought, and years of roaring wildfires that tore hungry through the dry and splintered wood; there were years of flooding and years of rot. What history has been lost between the pauses, what stories erased by the sun rising and setting and rising and setting? What memories have burned away, what heartwood has turned to ash?

Every winter, the cedar waxwings migrate through the canyon, and the day before my father-in-law Frederic died they flocked into the canyon and ate pyracantha berries until the branches were bare and the birds were drunk on the juice. Even in the late stages of Alzheimer's, Frederic loved the cedar waxwings, the ruckus they made, the cacophony of the group as they moved from tree to tree. I remember holding his hand and looking out the window when they came, staring out at the old oak tree. The cedar waxwings were perched in its branches, flashes of yellow on the tips of their tails like sudden blossoms in the middle of winter, chattering and singing through the leaves. By the next morning, Frederic had died, and the birds, too, were gone. A sudden silence was all that remained. I walked outside and stood beneath the oak tree, the skin of pyracantha berries bleeding red beneath my feet.

Alzheimer's was like a fire, too. It ate through Frederic's core, it burned all those memories away. All of the stories he'd collected, the places he'd been and the winds that had wrapped around him—all of it disappeared. Perhaps there are some things you cannot carry, some things you can never take with you. Perhaps memory is shaped like the wind, invisible. Or, maybe nothing can be left behind until it's been forgotten, until it's been erased.

The sound of it must have been thunderous, but we didn't hear anything over the wailing of the wind. It was only in the morning that we realized the oak tree had been split cleanly in two. One half tumbled onto the hillside, crushing the deck beneath it, and the other half teetered unsteadily without the counterbalance, swaying dangerously close to the side of the house. In the place where the trunk had forked, there was a gaping, ragged wound. The wood was frail, brittle to touch, and it stuck out in thin, white slivers like a row of teeth around the blackened mouth of the tree where, looking down, the insides were empty. That hollow place where the tree started to cave in on itself, started to bend too far in the wind.

Looking back on that night, I've started to convince myself that I heard the splintering of the oak tree, the slow-motion breaking of its limbs. That I heard the hollow groan as it fell to the hillside, the crunch of the deck railing trying to catch it, the rustling thump of the branches landing against the soil. I imagine the splintered

remains of the trunk looming sharp and silent in the night, the tree's unknown history slipping away in the wind, the scent of stories carried onward to other places.

Within a week, a team of gardeners came with chainsaws and sliced the splintered limbs into more manageable pieces that fell stiffly to the ground. I remember sawdust drifting through the air that smelled, faintly, of sand and fire and sunlight. The gardeners took some of the wood, thick slices that they said would be dried and used for firewood, which struck me as ironic. They left us a long, narrow slab and we made it into a rough-hewn bench that we placed on the hillside overlooking the ocean. The round cutout in the deck where the oak's trunk broke through was left untouched, and the gardeners shaved the trunk to the height of a table, usable as such with a circle of glass put on top. Standing beside it, you can trace the rings of years spiraling in from the bark, until your fingers fall into the hollowed center, the yawning blackness of a past burned away.

When the gardeners were finished, we stood beside the window looking out, the same window I gazed through while holding Frederic's hand. Without the great oak tree, the view was strange and unfamiliar. There was an opening or an absence, something fallen away. A sudden silence in the view.

"That's what nature is," my mother-in-law said.

She meant that nothing lasts forever, not even the ancient oak trees that have been here for hundreds of years, the ones we expected to stay long after we'd moved on.