Californians

Searching for the Golden State

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me. He was giving us all he had left, but it wasn't the money. Here were these two old people with nothing, no resources, no family, no homeland, and no income. They had nothing left to offer but their honor and their trust. I said, 'Okay, we'll hold the money for you and see what we can do.' "

Kathy and I are walking along Jackson Street again, past Kogura Appliance, a restaurant called Ken Ying Low, the meeting hall of the Gran Oriente Filipino Masonic Order. Looking elegant in her lightweight tweed jacket and designer jeans, she is leading the way toward a place where they serve San Miguel Dark, that thick beer imported from Manila, with the texture of port, the malty flavor, the label that looks like a splash of Spanish tile. We are talking again about her grandfather, who was born in Japan in the 1880s. As eldest son he should have had promising opportunities there, but by the time he was seventeen his parents were both dead, and the family's holdings had crumbled. Japan's early efforts to industrialize, to move from a feudal to a modern society in one generation, had depressed the rural economy of his home region. He joined the multitudes leaving for America in the first years of this century. Since the West Coast was where he landed, America for him was California, where he found work and settled. He was a fisherman, a farmer, a strawberry rancher, a man of the sea, and a man of the earth. He raised ten children, who in turn raised more than thirty grandchildren. When Kathy was born it was still against the law for her grandfather to become a citizen of the United States, though the huge clan he spawned were all citizens by birth. This law was finally rescinded in 1952, which in the history of laws is not that long ago.

"It is so easy to forget," she says, "how long it has taken, how late in the day it has been before certain basic rights have been recognized."

Now Kathy is raising a son of the fourth generation, a *yonsei,* finishing up her law degree at Santa Clara, and volunteering legal help for the most recent wave of immigrants. At the ALA they are all young Asian Americans, with the vigor of their youth and the empathies of kinship, raised in places like San Francisco, Monterey, Oxnard and Orange County, looking into the eyes of men and women from Laos, Phnom Penh and Saigon and seeing their own parents or the grandparents who made a similar journey across the Pacific toward this same coastline hoping for the second chance.

12 FROM GAVIOTA PASS TO MALIBU

Six Reasons Why I Love Los Angeles

Approaching from the north I begin to feel it when I am still a hundred miles away. I feel it as soon as I squeeze through the rocky gap at Gaviota Pass and swing out onto the coast road below the Santa Ynez Mountains. There is something else in the air, a shift in the landscape, another quality of light. The slopes behind me resemble slopes in Mexico. Where stone shows through the brushy cover, it has the color of bright sand. The air is softer now, and the ocean tropical. Passing through this arm of the Transverse Range I have crossed some elusive border, and already I hear it coming toward me, the highest octave of a distant early warning system. I feel the outer edges of its irresistible magnetic field.

I have entered the Southern California continuum, which can be seen in the pervading tropical style, and in the film on the atmosphere which thins or thickens, depending on what has recently rippled outward from L.A., and in the affection for the L.A. *Times.* In Santa Barbara you will find the *Times* in thousands of early morning driveways, while a bit farther north and on the other side of the Santa Ynez Mountains the *Times* starts competing with the San Francisco *Chronicle,* whose sphere of influence reaches that far down the coast and as far north as Grant's Pass, Oregon. Some say Portland.

Southern California, I have heard it argued, actually begins at San Luis Obispo, or on the final climb outside San Luis where the black oak appears for the final time, or for the first time, depending on your direction. Others will say Santa Barbara is the point of entry. My friend

Noel Young, who lives up the hill from the Santa Barbara Mission, says the line is not a matter of foliage or climate but of dialect. Somewhere between San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara, he claims, there is a point where people stop saying *rodeo* with an accent on the first syllable, as it is pronounced around Salinas and in the central valley, in Oregon, Nevada and Wyoming, and they start saying *ro-DA Y-o,* with the accent where Spanish speakers put it. I would add that in the transition zone, in these borderlands between San Luis and Santa Barbara, one more feature of the bio/social environment begins its subtle shift, defining the passage from one part of the world to another. I am talking about the traffic. The precise point on the roadway will vary from day to day, from hour to hour. But somewhere along here—in my experience, usually south of Gaviota Pass, soon after the coastline makes its dramatic bend inward, eastward from Point Conception—there is a moment when the traffic leaps to its next increment, and something affects the look of the vehicles themselves, the ways they are decorated, the profiles and steering wheel attitudes of the drivers. It is not like traffic farther north, and this is not at all like approaching San Francisco, which comes upon you suddenly and can take you completely by surprise. The very look of this traffic, together with the Mexico coloring of sea and mountain, and the denseness of atmosphere, both thicker and softer, embraces and surrounds you and warns you and announces that, whether or not L.A. is your destination, it is looming and you are almost there.

This is the first reason I love Los Angeles: the mounting anticipation of the approach, arriving from the north, as the traffic accelerates, especially at twilight, when desert hues tint the sky. Then everything ahead of you seems tender and expectant and exquisitely perilous.

Today I happen to be making a late-morning approach. In June this is a serious mistake, but here I am speeding along the Ventura Freeway, bumper to bumper at seventy miles per hour, my eyes afire, and remembering a simpler and purer time, another approach, by air, into L.A. International, some two months ago, looking down upon the cottony lake that I am now plunging into head-on. The peaks of the San Gabriels rose out of it into a perfect sky, sharp and clean against the blue, creating the look of an island seen from afar, with rain-heavy clouds gathered around some old volcano. I thought of Carey McWilliams's book about Southern California, called *An Island on the Land.* The book came out in 1946, before this lake existed. But the lake fits

what he was talking about: a realm apart, with its own legends, its own perimeters, its own zany architecture, and nowadays its own self-generated atmosphere, this blanket of cotton camouflage that makes the city invisible from above.

Arriving by plane you drop down into it, becoming then invisible to other planes and passengers as you sink to the bottom of the lake made of smoke and fumes and haze, and after a while, if the city is going your way, as it was for me that day, you simply stop seeing it. It's there, but it isn't there, just as the roar of jet engines goes unheard by people working at the airport.

From the Pacific Southwest depot I went straight to Hertz where a car had been reserved. A terrific smile from the handsome Chicana there, as she handed me the folder with the typed-up forms. I stepped outside to the traffic island, just as the Hertz shuttle pulled up and the doors whooshed open. Climbing aboard, I handed my folder to the driver, who was in command, an airport veteran who knew exactly what to do. There were plenty of seats, plush and roomy. At the lot my keys waited on a little outside table under a canopy, in full view of the rows of gleaming cars. The noise of takeoffs and rev-ups and landings was so thunderous I could not hear what the woman was saying, but it didn't matter. I didn't need words. I needed the car, which she pointed out with a smile, still talking.

It started right up. The windows were clean, the tank full. In seconds I was heading down Century toward the San Diego Freeway, which took me north toward the city. It was miraculous the way lanes opened up in front of this car, as if the path were cleared by unseen cordons of escort police. When the L.A. freeway system is on your side, there is absolutely nothing like it anywhere else in the world. I have also been picked up at this airport by a chauffeur, in a long dark Cadillac, an English chauffeur who wore one of those hats and called me "sir," and that was, for me, a moment to remember. But the fact is, I prefer to do my own driving. It is part of the thrill. In L.A. the freeway is a form of entertainment, a form of action, a form of commitment, a form of engaging the environment on its own terms, and, if you survive, a source of infinite satisfaction. Survival, in this case, means arriving on time, which I did, intoxicated with my own prowess.

I was headed for a studio, where a studio executive was going to talk about a script. There was a place to park near the door of the building. Inside the cool and air-conditioned lobby the instant I pressed a button, the elevator doors slid open. One thing that keeps L.A. charged up is the outside chance that at any moment you can run into a celebrity, and

this is what happened on the way to the meeting, during the perhaps thirty seconds I was riding in the elevator. A man was standing there, watching the floor numbers blink. I recognized him, though in the first seconds I did not know why. I tried to place his merry and wasted eyes. As we reached the fourth floor, which was my destination, it came to me. I was electrified. "You're Jack Nicholson!" I proclaimed. The doors slid open. I had to step out. He smiled and said, "That's right." The doors closed and he ascended.

I walked to the reception desk, made of polished mahogany or teak. Square golden columns rose out of sight on either side of the desk. Everything glistened, expensive and new, and she was glad to see me, an alluring woman with her face made up in the highest fashion, her cheekbones brushed with deep color, her eyes dark, feline and attentive, her blouse white, seeming to glow with white. I had a feeling about this receptionist, a feeling that may not be fair to project upon her, since we only exchanged a few words and glances, but she seemed to me in that fleeting exchange to embody, to make palpable, why I love this particular city when it is on my side, rolling in my direction. All this high-speed equipment is located in the subtropical setting, so that all movements fast or slow seem sultrier, more languid and exotic, and also more precarious, because at any moment you could be swept into something indescribably corrupt and ruinous.

She pressed a buzzer and murmured my name, and in the distance a door opened. The executive was coming out to greet me, a young fellow wearing the kind of khaki-colored military shirt a recruit might have worn during World War I right after boot camp but just before going overseas. As I stepped into his office I said something about the weather, just in passing, and he said, "Oh? What's it like out there today? I haven't looked."

It was then 11:45 A.M. The office was cool and appeared to be fully lit by daylight pouring in from somewhere—an effect of the pure white walls, the white furniture, a few shrewdly placed lamps. He pulled back the floor-to-ceiling curtains revealing a gaseous cloud of mangy white pressing right up to his window.

"Hmmmm," he said, squinting into it. "You see that revolving sign over there? It's nearly half a mile away. Some days, when it's really bad, I can't see that sign at all."

Well, I was thinking, if it isn't one thing, it's going to be another. Every place people live has its price. Minnesota has its blizzards, Galveston has its hurricanes, Kauai has its tidal waves, and the Sacramento Delta has its floods. That day I was willing to forgive L.A. everything, because everything I had touched was functioning the way

it had been designed to function. The city worked. When L.A. works it is wonderful.

But that was then, as Governor Jerry Brown has said, and this is now, and days like today put your affection to the true test. Racing along the bottom of this lake at seventy, I am still miles from town, when the red lights start popping in front of me, and the traffic slows to a creep, then a crawl. Later on I learn that somewhere far ahead, on other freeways, in other parts of the system, various disasters have conspired to bring us all to a gradual halt. An oil truck has overturned and exploded, setting other vehicles on fire, spilling hundreds of gallons across four lanes, which will be closed off for hours. On another freeway, some distraught mother has thrown her two-year-old from an overpass, horrifying the drivers who must hit the brakes, swerve and spin to avoid the little body on the roadbed. Police have closed that route too. But I don't know this yet. All I know is, here we sit, while somewhere up above, the sky is blue, tinted and murky, but blue, and the sun too, the daily sun, though blurred, is shining through, hot, hot, hot, and today the city is not working very well at all—one of those times you reach out for meaning, and find it, whether or not it's really there, because you need it so desperately.

I reach over and switch on the radio:

Mostly sunny today and tomorrow, with late night and morning low clouds. Highs today on the coast near eighty-three, expect high nineties in the valley areas. The lows tonight near seventy. Condition of the air is unhealthful.

As usual with newscasters, nothing in the tone suggests that unhealthful air is anything to raise your voice about. It is just one more fact in a universe of facts and gets equal billing with the clouds and the temperature. With nothing to read in the tone of voice, I try to read the sequence: pay attention to what comes next. A woman is singing the end of a Cole Porter tune, with a jazzy orchestra behind her, and it seems to be a comment on the weather report:

It was great fun
but it was just one
of those things.

This song also introduces a talk-show host, a psychiatrist, who now begins to talk. She is taking answers to today's questions: "If you were reincarnated, what *thing* could you like to come back as?"

A woman caller is on the line. Her name is Ruth.

"I'd like to come back as a mountain," Ruth says.

There is a long pause. Finally the psychiatrist says, "Have you thought about why you would like to come back as a mountain?"

"Yes."

Another pause.

"Would you like to tell us why?"

"I'd be strong, and solid, and could also give people pleasure. That is, I am thinking of a mountain that is out in the wilderness somewhere, so that wildflowers can grow on it, and wild animals can run free, and people who come there to the mountain can gain inspiration. They could hike up and down and be exposed to the wonders of nature and come away refreshed."

I am touched by this, on the verge of tears. At least, my eyes have started to water. Being from a coastal town much farther north, I don't have an air conditioner, don't ordinarily need one. In this kind of heat I have to keep a window open. Perhaps the ozone and oxides are wetting my eyes. But I think it is this woman's testimony. I see her sitting by the phone somewhere in Glendale, or perhaps standing in a booth in Torrance, staying indoors until the smog lifts, and thinking about what she might become in her next life.

Though I cannot yet see the city, I hear this and I know I am getting close. The naked honesty of her confession. Over the radio. I may be too susceptible, stuck here in my car, reaching out for anything. I may identify too much with her, because she and I, we are both marooned. In this moment I see clearly that here is the third thing I love about Los Angeles. Everything is out in the open, even when everything seems to be closing in. What many observers have labeled as deception and delusion is really an elaborate form of honesty. Nothing is hidden. If you think it, say it. If you like it, wear it. If you need it, let us know. When it comes to exposure, L.A. sets the pace.

Rampant excess has a lot to do with this. Excess and exposure cannot be disentangled here. Every feature of life is so excessive, everything is exposed. A while back an old buddy of mine arrived in Santa Cruz from Los Angeles in a 1972 Cadillac sedan, very long and elegant and looking almost new. It was the spring of 1981, a season of unparalleled energy consciousness. People everywhere were joining car pools, dusting off the ten-speeds, and lobbying for more public transit. Anyone getting less than twenty-eight miles to the gallon was considered part of the problem, not part of the solution, and here came Q cruising up the coast in his Caddy.

It was a great-looking car, inside and out. A fingertip could lower the

windows. The seats could swallow you. I asked him what kind of mileage he was getting.

"Oh. Eight in the city. Maybe eleven or twelve on the road."

I did some quick calculating.

"You have just burned up thirty gallons between here and L.A."

He raised his eyebrows in mild surprise. "I guess that's one way of looking at it."

"I didn't think people were buying Caddies these days. Around here they are saying the Honda, the Chevette is the car of the future."

"You're exactly right. That's why I picked this baby up for a grand. It's a buyer's market. There was no way I could get into a Datsun or a Honda for less than seven, so I figure I got five or six thousand extra to blow on gasoline in the next few years, and meanwhile this boat rides like a dream."

L.A., I thought, as he purred down the driveway, heading north. Hard-core and flagrant.

It is common, where I live, to hear people bad-mouthing L.A. for its excesses, and for situations like the one I am still stuck in, trapped on the Ventura Freeway by nameless forces somewhere ahead, perhaps permanently scarring my lungs, with nothing to see but murky subdivisions, the once glorious perimeter of mountain peaks invisible and irretrievable, nothing to hear but lonesome previews from the next life.

"I just don't go in there," one woman told me recently, making it sound like a free-fire zone, or a deep cave full of bats. "Some friends of ours, we've known them for years and the daughter was getting married, and they wanted us to come down for the wedding, but I said no, I was really sorry, but if we had to go into L.A. it just wasn't worth it."

This is what you hear every day from people in the north, gazing south in awe and consternation. At parties they tell jokes:

How many southern Californians does it take to make a cup of instant coffee?

I give up.

Two. One to add the protein-enriched, simulated dairy supplement, made of soybean concentrate, acidophilus culture and brewer's yeast. And one to steal the water.

They talk about secession. "I think it's a good idea," a fellow told me recently, a young attorney who had grown up down there, come north

for law school, and never returned. "Just cut those suckers off. What do you think?"

"Well," I said. "I kind of like L.A., you know, from a distance. I wouldn't want to break off relations completely."

"Why the hell not? They have already paved over everything worth looking at. The saddest part of my life was to watch my hometown turn to concrete."

"Where was that?"

"Pico Rivera."

"Did you think of that as Los Angeles?"

"I do now. It's all L.A., man, from Pomona to Santa Monica, from San Fernando to Huntington Beach. When I was a kid, there were fruit trees out there, farms, neighborhoods, rivers ran through town that looked like rivers are supposed to look. You could see the San Gabriels then, so close and so soft you could almost touch them. Then they tore out the trees and paved over the neighborhoods, and the mountains disappeared. Finally they lined the rivers with concrete. That was the final blow. I don't go down there any more. I can't bear to look at it."

The L.A. refugees. They are fanned out through all parts of the West. Their curse is remembering how something used to be, how some piece of California looked before it became a commodity on the world investment market. They move to other towns and join the uphill fight to save them from similar fates. They can be twenty-five or seventy. They can be found in Santa Cruz or Santa Fe, in Mendocino, Denver, Eugene, Spokane, Prince Rupert, Juneau, Banff and Nome. They look back toward where they came from, melancholy over some lost vista or demolished neighborhood, yet giving thanks that they escaped—escaped the place, the condition, the state of mind, what you might even call the organism perceived as L.A. This is the way the refugees, the former citizens, as well as numerous other Californians north of Tehachapi, regard it, as an organism, a kind of tumor attached to a rather small percentage of the physical map, which someday, some way or another, ought to be excised.

From the north, L.A. is seen as many people in other parts of America see California. The fact is, the observers nationwide who scoff and ridicule what appears to be going on in California are usually scoffing at and ridiculing L.A. When Nathanael West wrote about "the people who come to California to die," in *The Day of the Locust,* a jewel of a novel (which some regard as the most telling account of coastal foolishness), he was writing about L.A. In March of 1979, when Mary McGrory wrote in the Washington *Star,* "The nation's most populous state is another country, where there is no slush, no February and no struggle,"

she had just returned from L.A. In 1940, when Edmund Wilson, in his superb and still-quoted essay "The Boys in the Back Room," tried to describe what troubled him most about California and its writers, he described "the hypnotic rhythms of day and night that revolve with unblurred uniformity, and the surf that rolls up the beach with a beat that seems expressionless and purposeless after the moody assaults of the Atlantic."[18] In no way could such a passage apply to Sonora or Eureka or Salinas or Cloverdale or Susanville or San Francisco. Wilson was referring to things he had seen in L.A., which for decades now has taken 90 percent of the load when it comes to complaints and outbursts about whatever is going on out here—out there—on the coast. This the fourth reason I love the place. For the rest of California, it is out in front, taking the body blows, a kind of cultural punching bag. Luckily L.A. is big enough to roll with these punches. L.A. for that matter hardly notices them at all.

L.A. is so huge I get giddy thinking about it, stupefied. There is nothing else like it for thousands of miles in any direction. When you are inside, driving through, or walking around expecting sooner or later to see some glimpse of a horizon or a demarcation line, there appears to be no end, no middle, no beginning. You see signs here and there, noting where certain limits used to be, county lines, city limits: Alhambra, Inglewood, Culver City, Beverly Hills. Elderly Chicanos can sometimes point out the boundary lines of the original ranchos, a plane of order, a grid one layer beneath the city and the county lines, which are now one layer beneath the numberless boulevards, intersections, unfolding tracts and condo parks that spread ever outward. This is the fifth reason I love Los Angeles. It is now so huge and ungainly and by its very size so vulnerable, it is like the whale in the Yurok legend from northern California. She was a female whale, who found herself marooned, landlocked in a tiny lake after the ocean's waters, which had flowed in to fill riverbeds and canyons, began to recede and flow back into the Pacific, leaving this shallow pond for the whale to float around in. She could flap her tail and stay alive, but the support system required to maintain such a vast and wonderful and misplaced creature was gradually draining away.[19]

By the time the traffic loosens, I am late for all the things I had planned to do in town. The hell with it, I say, and head for the coast. It is fifteen degrees cooler out there, according to the radio, and my friend D who lives north of Malibu has access to the water, to relief. It is mid-afternoon when I finally pull up in front of his house. Within minutes I have

changed into my swimming trunks and we are stepping down the bluff, across the sand, sliding into water so much warmer than the waters of Monterey Bay, where I usually swim, I feel like we are in Hawaii. I submerge and scoot along the sandy bottom, cooling off, calming down, taking cool brine against the eyelids. We swim out a hundred yards, slow and easy, to a broad stand of undulating kelp. The slick brown leaves and pods make a blanket across the water. We flop back on this bed of kelp, which does not quite support the body but makes floating nearly effortless—under the sun, in Hawaiian water, gazing back at the cliffs that rise above the beach road. From this far offshore they could almost be the cliffs behind Makaha on the lee shore of Oahu, where the mountains are also very dry.

After we have frolicked awhile, spewing little fountains into the air and submerging under the kelp, D describes how the flames looked coming up over those peaks during the big fire of 1978. He saw them first as they flashed like coronas from the far side of the range, then as they leaped down through brush toward the lower bluffs where the houses stand. For two days he became a firefighter and saved his own house, though several others nearby were lost. From here we can see the empty space where one burned to the ground. Others are raggedy hulks.

It is an awesome memory, flames vaulting the mountains to burn holes into this most westerly outpost of L.A., this shore-hugging string of beach houses. It has happened before, D says, and will no doubt happen again. You wonder how many houses it is wise to build at the base of these dry and fire-prone mountains. But you don't ask. New and expensive houses are already rising from the ruins and right next to the ruins. It is like asking about the smog. It is like asking about the water, those three slender threads that snake toward L.A. from the three nearest sources, which are not that near. The question belongs in a science fiction story or a disaster novel: Suppose ten million people were living in a semidesert where there was not one adequate source of water closer than two hundred miles? L.A. is now so abundantly incongruous in this habitat, the Yurok legend of the inland whale could be its premonition, perhaps a prophecy.

It is the legend of a boy named Toan and his wisdom figure, Ninawa. The boy never actually sees the whale, that is, he never *knows* he sees her. When he is very young his mother takes him into the mountains near their village. They come to a lake which is almost filled by this creature. But the whale lies so still the young boy thinks it is a log. Using the log he crosses the lake from one side to the other. Years later, near manhood, Toan is drawn back to this lake at a time of loss, of grieving

over the death of his grandfather. The whale is gone, carried off by "the Inland Spirits." But the whale speaks to the boy in a dream, explains his origins and foretells his future.

This is the sixth reason I love Los Angeles. She speaks to me in dreams—vivid, instructive dreams about the past and the future, sometimes fearful visions of being embalmed for years in dense traffic, with only a radio for comfort, bizarre nightmares easy to shrug off and laugh about here in the kelp beds a hundred yards from shore.

She was a bastard, according to the legend, a young bastard female whale possessing uncanny power.