

CHER ROBERTS

Unsettled: Blue Chill, 2013
Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36



COURTESY: THE ARTIST

to think of as burnt sienna and bleached gold streaks into my long reddish-brown hair. “What is this, the California look?” my oldest stepbrother jeered. I’d felt beautiful until he’d said that, drawing some strength I’d never felt from a mythical landscape where the sun always shone and the beaches ran, like sifted gold, down to an azure-green Pacific.

I was just a little too young and a little too cool to have been much influenced by the Beach Boys’ innocent version of California, a place filled with dune buggies and long-legged girls clad in skimpy bikinis that I felt shy in even when I started wearing them myself. A fan of the Stones, Jefferson Airplane, the Grateful Dead, I thought myself deeper and more complex than the songs on the *Surfin’ Safari* album my father embarrassed me with on my birthday, though I secretly loved “California Girls.” Despite the dark footage of the Stones’ Altamont concert on the evening news, something of the golden California mystique filtered its way into my Eastern psyche. I believed everything was beautiful there.

On some level, and with no idea as to what it really entailed, I wanted badly to be a California girl, cool and hip in my beads, flowers, and gauzy Indian-print dresses smelling of jasmine and sandalwood. California, where everything seemed to be happening, represented some kind of freedom I couldn’t find in the Northeast. I wanted to toss my hair, wear hiking boots with dresses, and get so tan I’d never need to shave my legs again, the hair on them blond as sunlight. When a girl in line behind me in the dining hall at my small Vermont college asked if I was from California, I was deeply flattered. I hugged her words to myself like a secret birthright, treasure that could be mine.

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Like so many of the most important encounters of my life, California at first lay a little to the side of my direct gaze, peripheral but present, containing more possibility and potential than I knew. I came to think of it as being a little like the low clouds and fog so often present on Southern California mornings (the result of the Catalina Eddy, David explained), which burned off by noon to reveal an enormous landscape. If anyone had told me that I was going to spend most of my twenties and thirties in Los Angeles County, swim at San Onofre Beach every

summer weekend, climb the back side of Half Dome on my first hiking trip, learn to drive on the San Bernardino Freeway, attend weekly poetry readings at Beyond Baroque (thinking nothing of driving an hour to get there), live with a ten-thousand-foot mountain visible from my kitchen window, or wear a silly tee shirt that said “I love LA,” I wouldn’t have believed them.

And if anyone had told me that, in California, I would begin to pursue seriously the writing I yearned for but feared, I might have cried, so shaky was my self-esteem and sense of my own voice (which I recorded secretly and sporadically on small slips of paper that I kept in a jumbled pile in my top desk drawer). Apart from my reading about the pioneers and my mother’s old cowboy boots in our dress-up box, California was my first encounter with what, for me, was the American West. The Golden State has been described as existing “west of the West,” as a place that is its own realm, one inherently different from the interior West. In many ways it is. But I think something of the pioneer spirit also lingers on there, making the state a kind of psychological frontier. Moving to California, I still got to be the woman in the covered wagon I had imagined as a girl, arriving in a new world.

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Whenever I fly into Ontario International Airport, I look for the mountains I think of as mine, first the San Bernadinos, then the San Gabriels. As the plane descends over the dun-colored back of the Mojave, I sit up, alert, waiting to see the mountains’ jagged spine arch up beneath us like the back of a stegosaurus. I name the peaks as I recognize them: Timber, Thunder, Telegraph, Ontario, and finally Baldy. They always come up faster than I expect their scruffy capes of trees and chaparral zooming into close-focus, and it always seems like we’re flying too low, headed for a crash in the rugged terrain. Scared but exhilarated, skimming through the air like the red-tailed hawks I used to watch soaring above the mountains, I feel I have entered into a different psychological realm. I am in California again, the place where anything can happen. I watch the plane’s shadow traverse the peaks and marvel at the fact that I have hiked, camped, and actually lived among them. It seems improbable to me now, something from another lifetime.