

**ALIETE GUERRERO**

## The Greatest Ally

Nature's healing effect

**W**e arrive at Antelope Valley to see the flowers that have bloomed by the millions in Southern California after a record series of winter storms. The poppies shimmer in an orange hue, a vast dimension of amazing patterns—a whimsical embroidery that goes on for miles. It seems there are billions, sprawling in unison, forming a massive orange sea. The vivid colors of the flowers, along with some purple lupines mixed in, give me a sense of hope. Yet, at closer viewing, something jarring takes place; the fragility of their beauty is disarming.

Seeking the perfect shot for their Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts, humans are leaving their marks. A woman is clutching a snatched bouquet of wildflowers while posing for that perfect shot. I gasp seeing another one sprawling on a bed of poppies, crushing their delicate petals. Too bad, these blooms had to fight the drought for so long and now they're fighting tourists. I turn my head away and leave the crime scene. It is just too much for me.

Such images take me back to September 2011, a few months after my last breakdown. Like the endangered poppies, I was fighting for my life. One year later, I was no longer on the ropes after a nearly lethal suicide attempt, but it left its marks.

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My son Chris and I arrived at Convict Lake. After we settled in the cabin, I went for a walk. It had been one year since the hospitalization. It had been one year since five hemodialyses rid my body of the glass of golden and glossy antifreeze I had ingested. It had been three months since my stay at the generic Ward D. I was ready for nature. I wanted to understand a bird, a flower, a fish. At the lake, the water was ever placid. Absorbent. And all the goldenrod on the lakeshore made me want to swim more. Early morning and the desire to be one with nature. No shelter. But the city wanted me. The city needed me. I knew I'd have to go back to asphalt and cement soon. Cars, cars, cars. Actually, the city went with me. There was always a cell phone, Chris's Nintendo DS, and Henry's compass. But the call to be one with the wild would not pass. I wanted to be a tree, a rock, goldenrod. I had lost something. What? Maybe the concentration of a seal hunter. But that afternoon, all I knew was that there was abundant

yellow and blue. Goldenrod around the lake. I had time to spare.

All those things were going through my mind as I walked through the green foliage intermingled with brown and reddish tones. There were dark and light passages, but mostly within the intricate patterns of leaves and stalks. There were a few unsettling spots because of wind conditions apparent in the bending of trees. I was unsettled by the possibility of windstorms and felt my anxiety rise.

I hastened my pace toward the cabin through a trail of eucalyptus, thinking about the Japanese word *shibu*, which is most commonly translated as a “branch or subdivision,” but to me it means “eliminating the unessential.” I wanted to start cutting down the excesses in my life. I wanted to simplify. I was going to start by giving some stuff away to the Goodwill when I returned.

That evening, a cyclone traveled eastbound from the Pacific. The low pressure brought a lot of unexpected snow. But we were cozy inside the cabin, cooking, playing Scrabble, and then making plans for the approaching New Year.

Later that evening, I read poems by Adélia Prado. She described wonderful ways to show love. After Chris fell asleep, I made red paper flowers and pasted them on valentine tins filled with Hershey's bites. I was always prepared to celebrate anything at any time because I was never sure I was going to be on this Earth for another season.

The light diffracted at a slit on the window. Hunters of the night made their sounds. I heard the crackling of fire-place logs. I was clutching bits and pieces of love under the wan source of light at Convict Lake that September 2011.

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Back in the desert, the glaring of the sun mixed with the golden hue of the billions of poppies urges me to wear sunglasses. Still, there is so much light, so much life. Nature is and will always be my greatest ally in the fight against mental illness.

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in an orange hue,  
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**Aliete Guerrero** is a Brazilian American writer whose work has appeared in *Paragraph Magazine*, *Wordscape*, and *Catamaran Literary Reader*. Her novel, *Blue Nestira*, is looking for a home. Her memoir, *The Wordsmith*, is about the author's own journey learning English to edit a life filled with career downfalls, broken dreams, and breakdowns. Will she ever stand a chance to rewrite her story, or will the past catch up with her before she finishes her masterpiece?