CHER ROBERTS

Tea on the Veranda, 2014
Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36

COURTESY: THE ARTIST

ALISON TOWNSEND

California Girl

Life in the Golden State after growing up on the East Coast

I was a California girl, in aesthetic and attitude.

—Rosanne Cash

In a photo that exists nowhere but in my mind, I am caught, suspended in mid-leap between two granite boulders in a talus field at the base of the mountains that rise above Squaw Valley. I'm in my forties, just clear of a divorce that's burned through my life like a wildfire, and I'm visiting California for the first time since leaving it nearly a decade before. There in the guise of attending a writing conference devoted to nature and the environment, I am trying to write about my experience living in California, how the landscape itself acted upon me, changing the way I saw the world. But the truth is I've come to see if California—where my ex-husband was born and raised and where we met in graduate school and lived during our twenties and thirties—is still mine. The conference is a foil, offering me structure and purpose I might not have felt traveling to California on my own. While I'm enjoying the workshops and readings more than I expected, it's the landscape that draws me. Rising around Squaw like roughly carved pieces in a board game tossed down by giants, the granite blocks of the Sierra uplift exert an almost magnetic pull on my body and psyche. So I am glad to be sprung for a short afternoon ramble, the mountains' distinctive scent of dust-baked granite and pine rising around me in invisible welcome.

A friend who's traveled with me to the conference from where we live, in Madison, Wisconsin, hikes beside me. Although I haven't ever been on this particular trail before, having spent more time hiking or cross-country skiing in Yosemite, or exploring the San Gabriels, each step seems to take me deeper into something familiar in myself, something that I have forgotten or which has lain dormant, while I have struggled, so homesick for verticality in the Upper Midwest that I sometimes mistake cloud banks for the mountains. As we tramp along, moving into the rhythm of walking, a fizz of happiness rises from deep inside me, like the springs that feed Squaw Creek into the twist of tangled silver rushing downhill beside us. I lift my face to the sun. I feel sharply etched, limned by light, scraped as the boulder I stand on, as if I, too, have been hewn out of the ground, tumbled into a place different from where I started. Light glitters off the granite's rough surface like tiny jewels. Enlivened by the brilliance, I hop from boulder to boulder, darting and flashing like the Steller's jay I tossed peanuts to earlier in the day.

I didn't know anything about geography or distance in California, about water feuds, ethnicity, smog, overpopulation, or freeways.

"You look as if you belong in this landscape!" my friend calls out. "I do," I call back to her. "I do." And it is here, in the moment when I hang, suspended in the air between my own pushing off from one stone and landing on another, that I understand something the land itself seems to be trying to tell me: I am home. Unlike so much else lost in the wake of my divorce, I have not lost California, this place that shaped me, making me someone different from who I was when I first arrived. There are moments like this in a life, generally unbidden, when the invisible energy of a place seems to rise up through our boot soles and communicate itself to us, welcoming us as I am being welcomed, there on the side of the mountain, the rocks calling out to me as if they know my name, reminding me that the person I was when I lived there is still alive within me.

* * *

It was fire season when I arrived in Southern California in September 1975. When I stepped off the plane at Ontario Airport, the hot, dry Santa Ana winds were blowing in from the Mexican desert. The air was charged, shimmering with heat that made me lift my hand to shade my eyes as I came down the steps from the plane, overdressed in my blue Shetland sweater and matching skirt, looking for my on-again-off-again college boyfriend. Although I was supposedly in California to begin a doctoral program in English at Claremont Graduate School, I was really following him. Against my better judgment, for we'd broken up many times before, I hoped that things would work out between us.

Full of the illusion that I was moving forward in my life, rather than making choices by default, I'd screeched through my last days of college, writing my thesis at the last minute, my course set on California. As shoulder-high drifts of snow finally melted and the apple trees bloomed in Vermont, I dreamed about California, unaware that, like so many before me, I was orienting by a mirage, by what I imagined California to be rather than what it is. The girl next door in my dorm had a family cottage in Big Sur. When she described watching the sun set over the Pacific from tall bluffs that tumbled down to the beach from the cottage, I imagined myself there, gazing west, notebook in my hand, describing it as no one else ever had.

Imbued with a kind of ignorance that now seems blessed, I went, heedless of the fact that Claremont is in Southern California, nowhere near Big Sur. I didn't know anything about geography or distance in California, about water feuds, ethnicity, smog, overpopulation, or freeways (a word new to me, growing up with turnpikes and tollways). I didn't know about LA, city of angels found and lost. I certainly didn't know about what I would come to see as Northern California's unbearably patronizing attitude toward the supposedly hedonistic southern part of the state, which I would grow to love and call home. In short, I knew nothing—the best possible condition, perhaps, for setting out on a three-thousand-mile journey.

I traveled with a $2,000 cashier's check (everything I'd earned, working evening shifts that summer as a pediatric nursing assistant) in my pocket, one small suitcase, and my red college footlocker. With the exception of bus and train trips back and forth between college in Vermont and my parents' house in New York State, I had never traveled alone. I had never been in a plane. I had never been west of Pittsburgh. More concerned with what to wear than where I was really going, I didn't even look at a map. I just went, flinging myself in a westward direction, as if diving into the green Pacific.

* * *

When I came to California, Ontario, now an international airport, felt small, almost rural. Planes landing from the east crossed the desert mountains I hadn't thought to look for, and swooped in over the vineyards of Cucamonga and Etiwanda. To the north, above Foothill Boulevard, orange groves still backed up against the front ridge, not yet razed for housing developments. Travelers stepped down the stairs from their plane and directly onto the tarmac, walking to the terminal that, like so many buildings in Southern California, seemed to me inappropriately flat, as if the intense sunlight of the place exerted some kind of pressure that made everything hunker down on the ground.

The light struck me most. Even now, when I think about what is "golden" in California, I think of the light burnishing the rolling hills.. There's a reason why it's called "fabled." Nothing prepared me for the merciless intensity or the bounty of the light. Now clear as May wine, now filtered by low clouds and fog that roll in from the ocean, now veiled in smog, the color of red ocher in a second-stage alert, now a scorching ball of white, the Southern California sun is omnipresent. That first day, it beat down, entering me like a laser. I sensed even then that it was going to penetrate my being, changing me in ways I couldn't imagine. Looking for my boyfriend in the crowd of people in shorts and Hawaiian shirts that waited inside the gate, I felt afraid, filled with a momentary impulse to step back inside the air-conditioned dark of the plane and sit down. Overwhelmed, I wished I could bury my face in the arms of the suddenly too-warm sweater I'd donned that morning in New York, pinning a pink rose to my collar. What did I think I was doing?

September is the worst time of year in the San Gabriel and Walnut-Pomona Valleys. It's the smoggiest time in Southern California and the height of fire season—a double whammy conjunction of human-caused pollution and climate. Santa Ana winds blowing in from the Great Basin and the Mojave can huff a stray spark into a wildfire in minutes. Although they cleanse the air, blowing the smog toward the ocean, scrubbing the mountains sharp and clear as the 3-D pictures in a 1950s Viewmaster, Santa Anas also induce anxiety in some, supposedly the result of their positive ions. In my experience, they either energize you or make you feel as if you're filled with swarming bees. My skin blasted by desert heat, I didn't know how to react. All I knew was that the wind seemed to blow through me, inhabiting my body for a moment, then turning me inside out.

Things were over with the college boyfriend in weeks. And there I was in California, alone, except for two wonderful female housemates, in the ugly cinder-block apartment of graduate student housing where my black-and-white postcard collection of women writers kept falling off the walls. Everything was strange to me, from palm trees to orange groves to the sprinklers that went on in the middle of the night and were, I realized, the inspiration for Joni Mitchell's "hissing of summer lawns." I was an American Studies major starting a PhD program in English, when all I really wanted to do was write, though I had no idea how to go about that terrifying endeavor. Was there anyone ever so young and unworldly, so clueless and innocently hopeful? There was, and it was me.

The Mt. Baldy fire began a few weeks after my arrival. It lit the night sky above the San Gabriels north of Claremont like an earthbound aurora or vision out of Blake, a Promethean disaster caused by arson or simple human carelessness. As I struggled to find my way in an academic program that, in addition to being completely wrong for me, was run by aging, white men who delighted in putting down their female students, the fire raged in the foothills, damaging Padua Hills, Palmer Canyon, Potato Mountain, the front ridge. Covered with a layer of gritty gray-and-white-flecked ash, Claremont resembled a contemporary Pompeii. Except that, rather than being frozen in whatever position of shock and surprise the choking soot found them in, everyone was going on about life as normal, shaken, but at the same time accepting in that peculiar, life-on-the-edge way only Californians can be.

It was about this time I met my future husband, David, at a campus art opening. We sat on a blue leatherette-covered piano bench, drank too much wine, and talked about the fires, a bright red, wall-sized abstract painting blazing behind us. Lean and rangy as a mountain coyote, David had been out running before the show and was still clad in shorts and a tee shirt. An economics student who had just passed his qualifying exams, he was researching his dissertation on exhaustible resources, focusing on water, an irony even I twigged to.

A little unsure of himself, engagingly boyish, with

floppy blond hair, a cleft chin, and teasing manner, David was a native Californian who loved the mountains and had hiked everywhere. Different from guys I'd known in college, gentler and kinder, he seemed authentic, new as the landscape I had plunged into. He would become my guide to this place I at first hated, then came to see as my adopted home. He would take me hiking in Yosemite (where I saw my first bear), Sequoia, Point Reyes, and the Redwood Parks. We'd camp up and down the coast, from just north of Santa Barbara to Eureka. We'd run foot races on the beach at Morro Bay, ride bikes in Cambria by the Sea (where I saw my first wild turkey), and sit for hours on the bluffs at Montaña de Oro, watching sea otters eat abalones, the tap of the rocks they used to break the shells audible above the waves. We'd even housesit for two summers up a narrow canyon in Mt. Baldy Village, cradled in the San Gabriels' rough embrace, Bear Creek running beneath our bedroom window, blacktailed deer crossing our path when we ran on Glendora Ridge. Once, while hiking the back side of Baldy, seven bighorn sheep crossed our path, having come straight up a steep scree slope. Looking into their eyes, I felt for a few moments beholden, caught in a spell of limitless wildness. For a girl from the Northeast, it was all new and wonderful. Bigger than any landscape I'd ever known, it stretched my senses, opening me to possibilities I hadn't imagined, the enlargement of self the magic California does best.

David was deeply distressed by the Baldy fire. Towering ten thousand feet, the highest point in the San Gabriels, Mt. Baldy (officially known as Mt. San Antonio) rises behind Claremont like an enormous Buddha, the natural focal point of the area. Several times that evening David said, "They're burning my mountains," as if he had a personal stake in the matter. A nature girl, raised in rural places, I liked this about him. Even in our first conversation, something of his care for the landscape seeped into me, burning me like the searing California light I couldn't believe I'd ever get used to. In fact, David was, from the beginning, so bound up in my mind with the sheer physicality of California that for many years I associated him with the landscape itself, as if he were one of the desert bighorns he loved, here then gone, nothing in their wake but the scent of sage on the wind and the faint skitter of scree. Running or hiking or biking behind him, it didn't occur to me for a long time that I was building my own relationship with the place.

The fires that autumn were eventually contained, the winter rains came ("LA has two seasons, summer and January"), and David and I became a couple. The following spring I moved into his apartment above an old carriage house behind a Victorian in Pomona. Paneled in knotty pine, with steeply slanting eaves, it was like a roll-top desk with windows. It overlooked a yard that, with its orange, lemon, grapefruit, kumquat, and apricot trees, felt like a personal Eden. Boiling in the summer, chilly in winter, 355 East Kingsley was a perfect first home, so dear to us we'd later pay rent on it for a year when we lived out of state. I loved its long, old-fashioned kitchen sink, black and white Western Holly stove, and the view to the north, where Mt. Baldy stood framed every morning like something on a Chinese scroll.

Many things happened to me while living in that apartment. I finished my MA, got my first job, began writing, became a vegetarian, started running, went into therapy, lost a child, and survived a depressive episode. I made quilted ornaments for a Christmas tree we cut in the San Gabriel foothills, cooked Lentils Monastery Style from *Diet for a Small Planet*, and made dozens of jars of apricot jam. I listened to Jackson Browne, Linda Ronstadt, Fleetwood Mac, and George Winston, and adopted three cats who stretched each day in the bank of south-facing windows in the living room. Most important, I learned how to make a home with another person. But I'd always associate David's and my beginnings with fire, and with how I felt as I if were rising from the ashes of one life into another before they were even cool. Earthquake-shaken California, where the seismograph judders before resuming its path, etched like a trail of blood inscribed with a needle. Rattlesnake California, slipping out of its translucent, silvery skin into a new life.

* * *

I had a long history of dreaming about California before I got on a plane to go there. Even as a girl on a farm in eastern Pennsylvania, I bent with rapt attention over *To California by Covered Wagon* (a retelling of the Schallenberger party's trip to California in 1845), though I couldn't formulate a clear image of the Golden State. But I could visualize the journey across the plains from Council Bluffs. I imagined myself as part of the wagon train that split off from the Oregon Trail near Fort Hall and went south on a trail where only one party had gone before them, heading through valleys and rolling hills covered with sagebrush toward the Humboldt Sink and finally, the Sierra Nevada. I wrote my first story about it in third grade, describing a band of pioneers who struggled over the mountains to a lake set like a chip of sapphire among the peaks: Tahoe.

But the problem was the journey across the country seemed like what mattered. Once I got my pioneers to California, I couldn't figure out what they *did* there. My solution, pushing my stubby pencil across the page like a girl divinity, was to just make them keep on having children. My story ended in a litany of names, like some reverse reading of the book of Genesis. But this didn't tell me anything about the details of the landscape my imagination had carried me into. Like everyone else who has ever migrated there from somewhere else—almost everyone in California—I had to live there to discover what it really meant. Getting there was just the catalyst, the spark, the trigger. I tricked myself into thinking I was doing one thing—following a boy, going to graduate school—and believed in it just long enough to discover it was really about something else entirely.

* * *

When I was growing up back east, California was like the Grail, elusive, mysterious, out of reach, a reward for something I felt I hadn't yet accomplished. From the late sixties to the mid-seventies, when the five kids in my family were graduating from high school and leaving home at the rate of one per year, my three brothers each read *On the Road*, then made a ritual hitchhiking trip across country. Leaving our two-hundred-year-old house on a dirt road in North Salem, New York, they'd snag a ride to Interstate 684, heading south then west. Their destination was always California, a place that, given the fact that I was a girl and forbidden to hitchhike (though I often did, locally, with my little sister in tow) and did not yet even know how to drive, seemed impossibly far away.

But I not only didn't have a way to get there, I couldn't open my sights that wide. Accustomed to an intimate, circumscribed landscape, I couldn't get my mind around anything as big as California, let alone imagine myself there, a part of the landscape, indigenous as sage or scrub oak, bay laurel or manzanita, names I sometimes repeat aloud to myself now, lying in bed at night, as if to remind myself that I once knew their language.

California was like the Grail, elusive, mysterious, out of reach, a reward for something I felt I hadn't yet accomplished.

So I mostly watched as my brothers loaded their backpacks and constructed elaborate sets of signs, grommeted together with a special gun so that they could be easily flipped from one page to the next. I helped them letter the names of cites up and down the California coast—Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, Monterey, San Francisco, Berkeley (of course), and Eureka—coloring in the block letters until my wrist ached and the Magic Marker began to run dry. But though I, too, yearned to escape, I sensed I'd have to do it differently, more gradually, less dramatically. Leaving home, for me, was a more extended affair. My brothers traveled to California and then came back. It took me much longer to get there. But when I did, I stayed for a long time, through the formative years of my young adulthood, metamorphosing into someone I never dreamed I could be.

* * *

Like anyone else growing up in this country, I believed I knew what it was like in California. The summer I was sixteen I discovered suntans and Sun-In, an evil-smelling spray-on application consisting primarily of peroxide. Lying in our backyard (with a glass of water to pour over myself when I got too hot), I baked myself a color I liked

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.

* * *

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.

* * *

Whenever I fly into Ontario International Airport, I look for the mountains I think of as mine, first the San Bernardinos, 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.

Suddenly we had arrived in the middle of our lives without realizing exactly how we'd gotten there.

Looking down at the mountains that, despite the constant encroachment of humanity, remain so much the same as years go by, I can feel time ticking through me. "How did that all become the past?" I once asked David, after we had moved to Wisconsin and divorced. He shook his head sadly, as if it was beyond his comprehension as well. Suddenly we had arrived in the middle of our lives without realizing exactly how we'd gotten there, or why things weren't working, or why loving each other hadn't been enough. California, and whoever we had been there, seemed like it was gone, except in isolated snapshots: the two of us posed, grinning atop Mt. Baldy, or lounging with the *LA Times* at San Onofre Beach, or cross-country skiing in Yosemite, everywhere light-dazzled, the sun shining down.

* * *

Wherever I go I am looking for mountains. I am anxious without them and find their presence comforting. Roughly hewn, enormous, and foreboding, protected by thickets of easily ignited chaparral, the mountains of California are completely themselves. I studied them daily when I lived in Pomona, resting my eye on the San Gabriels as I ran at Puddingstone, a nearby then-primitive recreation area. Viewed from the valley, the San Gabriels, crisscrossed within by fault lines, stand out like paper cutouts on the horizon, so sharp it seems you'll cut your hand if you touch them. Heaved up in block faults, their billion-year-old metamorphic rock among the oldest in the state, these mountains are a tangible reminder of what emerges and what remains in a place where geological change occurs daily, shifting and straining in response to pressures from within. Perhaps that's why it's impossible to stay still or remain the same in California. Like it or not, the place moves, and that moves you. No wonder I look for mountains, even if, like the Sierras the Schallenberger party encountered, they seem to at first block the way like a high, snow-covered wall, a last obstacle between the journey and the arrival in the Promised Land.

* * *

Everyone has their own version of California. As my poet friend and teacher, Holly Prado Northup, was fond of saying during the years we saw one another weekly, "Los Angeles is the most imaginative city in the world." She wasn't talking about Hollywood, but something more elemental, something about California that enables us to create (or re-create) ourselves. Writing from the perspective of time, distance, and exile, it's easy to be nostalgic, to see California as somehow better and more magical than it really is. But that, too, is part of the story. Identity changes incrementally, as does our relationship with place. I resisted California at first. Then one day, running errands in Claremont, I caught a glimpse of myself in a store window and was surprised. Someone I didn't recognize looked back, a young woman with nut-brown skin and long, sun-bleached hair, wearing a flower-embroidered turquoise dress from Mexico. I understood then that I'd crossed over an invisible border within, one as clearly demarcated as if entering the Southland through El Cajon or San Gorgonio Pass. I'd become the California girl I wanted to be, and a southern one at that, the most Californian of all.

* * *

Moving to California was one of the most disorienting experiences of my life, a true exercise in dislocation. But it was also such a big move that there was little I could do but accept it, or rather, live with it, feeling my way into what it meant to be there while sustaining the illusion that I could go back to Vermont any time I wanted. Keeping a copy of Van Wyk Brooks's *The Flowering of New England* on the shelf above my desk, I mythologized the Northeast for several years, not realizing that I had already left it behind.

Living there, it was impossible to be romantic about California. It was too new (as if it had all just been built), too crowded, too bright, too noisy. It would take me years to develop a sense of its history. At the same time, everything in the natural world was a discovery, from camellias in winter to avocados to pomegranates to the scent of eucalyptus trees along College Avenue and Foothill Boulevard. I'd pick up their lance-shaped leaves and fragrant pods, sniffing them as I walked. I'd never been in a place where geraniums and jade plants grew big as bushes, where rosemary hedges bloomed in front of the low-slung, bungalow-style houses I grew to love, their dark, wood-framed interiors as cool and welcoming as water on a hot day.

The palm trees, with their dusty, clattering fronds, were so alien I didn't even know how to look at them. "I hate palm trees," I'd scream at David, the first summer we lived together, when the thermometer hit one hundred and our apartment became unbearable. It took me a long time to appreciate their beauty, to love the way they thrash and shine in the wind, to forgive them for living there, all but the California fan palm (*Washingtonia filifera*) non-native, just as I was.

The palm trees were just one indication of all the ways I had to keep reminding myself that this was the desert—or, as David was always quick to correct me, semi-desert, Mediterranean, really—a fact hard to keep in mind given Claremont's oasis-like feeling. Raised to turn the faucet off when brushing my teeth to protect the always-abundant water supply of our well back east, I was shocked at the sight of people hosing down their sidewalks with water instead of using a broom. It seemed profligate, wasteful, unthinking.

Even the Rancho Santa Ana Botanical Gardens, a beautiful preserve devoted exclusively to native Californian plants, relied on tremendous amounts of water to sustain its woodland, rock, dune, and desert areas. Claremont was supposedly built over artesian wells, which sometimes overflowed in the rainy season. But early on in my sojourn there, I was struck by the essential conflict between what was natural to the landscape and what had been nurtured there by artificial means. What was real? When so much that had been transplanted flourished, it was hard to discern what was truly native.

* * *

Since leaving California, I've often found myself defending it to naysayers and attackers, people who have never even visited the state. "I just don't see how you could live there," an acquaintance in Madison once said to me. "Well, it's easy," I retorted, defensive. "It's just a place like everywhere else. It's not like living in a movie. There are neighborhoods and houses and normal people going about their everyday lives." "Well, I still don't see how you could *live* there," she insisted. "I mean, you're such an outdoors person and all." I gave up. How do you explain having a ten-thousand-foot mountain as a daily presence in your life for ten years to someone from Ann Arbor? Or how it felt to hike its dusty switchback trails, sweat drying in the sun as fast as it emanated from your body? California was all *about* being outside, feeling the place on your skin, the air and light of it entering you as it does nowhere else.

But my friend's question made me think. It reminded me that for those who haven't lived there, California really *is* strange, a glitzy, foreign-seeming place attached to our country's western edge where who knows what might happen. I bridle when people reduce California to clichés. What really defines California for me has more to do with the landscape of the imagination and how it is informed by the physical place. The fact is that something about the largeness and the largesse of the West Coast in general, and California in particular, inspires a similar inner state. As artist Tony Duquette said, "The space [there] is vast. The things it holds are colossal and dreamlike. But they will not make you feel small. Your consciousness will be expanded." He was describing his environmental art project, *Our Lady of the Queen of Angels*, which celebrated LA, but he could have been talking about the state itself. Perhaps, as my second husband, Tom, a native Wisconsinite, once perceptively observed, "America offers possibility to the world; California is America's possibility." That is what it was for me.

Overarching all of this is how we each form our own idea of place and what it activates within us when we inhabit it. Place works on us, and California, with its sheer range and diversity—of people and terrain—works on us differently than anywhere else in America. In my first job, working as a publications writer in a state- and federally funded program in the public schools, I was one of the few Anglos in the office. Hiking and camping my way around

the state, I was amazed by its multiplicity of landscapes—mountains, ocean, desert, farmland, redwood forests, and more, all there for me to explore. I am not a cultural geographer, but it seems to me that these two factors combine almost alchemically to create California's biggest draw and its greatest myth—the dream of self-reinvention in a beautiful place where there is room for everyone. Or is it a dream? And if so, isn't it the American one, taken all the way west? All I know is this: California altered me, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. I am not the same person I was before I spent a decade watching that ten-thousand-foot mountain framed in my kitchen window every morning. All those mornings live inside me still, shifting, kaleidoscopic, changing, their terrain mine. California's richness and variety, its sense of possibility and permission, merged within me and became a kind of internal architecture, its beams supporting the house of who I am.

I carry California with me the way I carry abalone shells from Montaña de Oro, a piece of stone from the trail up the back side of Mt. Baldy, and a foot-long cone from a sugar pine I once found lying on a picnic table in the Sierras. At night sometimes, half a continent way, uneasily exiled in the Midwest, I think I can hear the ocean, mistaking the rhythm of my own pulse for saltwater, the crash and sibilant hiss of the retreating waves like the sound of rice thrown at a wedding, something mysterious and beautiful hidden within that sound. *Shush-shush*, the ocean says, and I listen.

Even now, out driving through a Wisconsin landscape, it's taken me years to recognize it's not really flat but rolling. I scan the horizon, looking for something vertical to get my back up against, a mountain by which to orient myself, something that will tell me that north is indisputably *north* by virtue of its invincible presence. I look for the Sierras floating, like the dreams of some nineteenth-century luminist painter, along the edge of the Central Valley, for the Coast Range edging the sea with a ruff of green. I look for the San Gabriels hunched—in one of the starkest juxtapositions of wilderness and civilization ever—in a jagged shield between the Los Angeles Basin, the San Gabriel and Pomona Valleys, and the high desert. And I look for "my" mountain," Baldy, its bare, sun-bleached crown there in that kitchen window every day, whether shrouded in mist or mantled in snow, burned like the visual equivalent for the word "home" into whatever indelible storage vault in the brain contains this kind of information. Where the mountains are. That is where I am, even years and miles away—shaken and exhilarated, companioned and changing, sunlight burning down upon me like beaten gold.

Alison Townsend is the author of *Persephone in America* and *The Blue Dress*. Her work appears widely, most recently in journals such as *Chautauqua*, *Parabola*, *Quarter After Eight*, *Southern Review*, and *Zone 3*. She had a "Notable Essay" mentioned in *Best American Essays 2014*. She is Professor Emerita of English at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, and is completing a collection of essays titled, *The Name for Woman Is River: Essays toward an Ecology of Home*.

CHER ROBERTS

Resting, 2013
Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 24 in

COURTESY: THE ARTIST