

Ruth Gooley

## High Sierra Flower

Yellow-crowned head thrown back,  
she inhales the rock-sprung breath  
that races towards Silver Pass,  
grabs at that barren wash of air,  
shouts like the wind,  
stops me in the huff of my tracks  
up the switchback  
only a footprint wide,  
leaves me breathless  
as pebbles crumble  
into the chasm  
just beneath my feet.

Only an inch or so high,  
alone in the blinkered silence  
of the upcoming slope,  
she grabs at the sun,  
crabs out soil  
from the meager dirt  
of her talus-gray terrain,  
warbles out color,  
the smallest of scents,  
signals for me to follow.  
I reposition my poles  
and push on  
towards the summit.

## New Trail to the Overlook

Down in the damp gully  
scraped out by the stream,  
for the first time I notice  
a path veering off to the left.  
A huff and I am over  
the giant toe of an oak,  
round the shoulder of a hill,  
mounting a saddle  
with the ocean prancing off to the west,  
waves so close, so fresh,  
a blue that I have never seen  
from the fire road,  
or even on the beach.  
I follow the split of footprints  
along the spine of the ridge,  
dodge past a spot  
flowing with reeds,  
white-haired, bee-struck.  
A sudden horizontal push,  
my legs tremble, my lungs shudder,  
the sun song drives me on,  
upward to the same old point,  
a place that I have never seen.

## Directive

I know her moods,  
her sullen summer heat,  
her fall blight,  
her winter greening,  
her fog-bound springs,  
her sea-spun breezes,  
her gales,  
her calm,  
her bird song,  
her rattler's feint and bite,  
the bright orange of her monkey flowers,  
the strangling vines of her dodder,  
the spread of her live oaks,  
the itch of her poison oak.

This is where I want to lie  
when I am only ashes,  
scattered at the Parker Mesa Overlook,  
close to hikers' steps,  
red ant nests,  
and ceanothus sprigs,  
just above the thrust of the sea.

Put me here when I am gone.  
Let the chaparral bear my bones,  
trail dust the soil of my heart.  
Black sage will carry the scent of my hope after rain.

This is my spot.  
Scatter me here,  
where sea spaces sky,  
where blue dragonflies flit  
above owl and bobcat scat,  
where bees scrabble for sugar  
in pink buckwheat tops.

Let me lie here in this place  
I know so well,  
every turn in the trail,  
every fold in the hills,  
every season, every time.  
Death will be bearable if  
I'm not far from  
the coyote's nightly yowl,  
the hawk's shriek,  
the tumble of the surf.

Throw my dust here and step back.  
Let me settle into the place I love best.  
Scatter me here, at the end of the trail,  
near the ridgelines I love to climb.  
Let this view of the Santa Monica Mountains  
be my last retreat.

## Shelter Island Park

Dredged and filled in, circumscribed  
by the groan of the 5 freeway,  
the crush of tall buildings to the south,  
a lining of mussel-crusted rocks,  
the spit of land at the end of San Diego Bay  
lies just at the tide line. I stop at a bench,  
sit, examine a cormorant observing me  
with inquisitive turquoise eyes.  
Unflappable, the bird does not flinch,  
preens, watches me go. Radar-topped and grim,  
a military behemoth slides through the calm,  
no wake, no sound, no disturbance  
of the ocean's float. Shelter Island Park,  
no longer its own green space, connected  
to my hotel, a restaurant, migratory birds, guns.

## My Brother's Legacy

Almost a mile high, the great crown,  
each tip gilded with mist and needles  
eager to inhale the dew, the eagle's  
distant pip. Within her immense skein  
of red bark, centuries of sun, frost,  
sky, the frozen tracks of a rat.

But ours is puny, browning branches  
dripping towards the ground,  
shedding twigs and decaying scents,  
its pot too small, the temperature too hot.  
My brother's gift so out of place here  
in this dry Southern California space.

What to do with a tree that's meant  
to crack the ground, split apart the land,  
race towards the falling sun,  
the rising moon, the drip of soil?  
It will outgrow sycamores, oaks, laurels,  
nurture rodents, live long past their deaths.

I buy a big new pot, a rake,  
pull apart the tangles of dirt,  
lug the plant up to a good spot  
where it can shine green,  
spread shade, shelter  
a nesting mouse.

One day a blast of wind  
through the canyon, across the hill,  
and I find the sequoia overturned,  
spine cracked, branches shattered,  
a baby mouse quivering in the shredded roots.  
I repot the tree, water, and wait.

## Lessons from a Packrat

A dry spring, the air so sere my lips crackle,  
the tent sparks, the March morning so hot  
I drag into the shade between two boulders,  
drop my pack, lean into the coolness of granite,  
into the surprise of a packrat's nest,  
a haphazard structure of cones stolen from pinyon pines,  
fibers gnawed from yucca and cholla,  
twigs wrenched from willows and creosote,  
tattered, but as strong as the desert wind,  
torrents of monsoon rain, the aching sun.

Her mother must have lived here,  
her grandmother too, generations of packrats  
here in this place. She learned from them,  
learned how to forage for food,  
learned the best time of day to hunt,  
the best sticks to use for nesting,  
the best place to birth her babes,  
to discard her droppings, to expand.

Safe from the horned owl, the hawk,  
she scrabbles in her den.  
She listened well, better than I,  
who can ask no more questions,  
learn no more, glean no messages  
from the emptiness of my mother's house,  
her stacks of goods, the echo of her face,  
the fade of her being.