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A Silicon Valley Life: A Silicon Valley Love Story

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A Silicon Valley Life:
A Silicon Valley Love Story

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Sharon Simonson

December 2020

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

A Silicon Valley Life:
A Silicon Valley Love Story

by

Sharon Simonson

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

December 2020

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ABSTRACT

A SILICON VALLEY LIFE: A SILICON VALLEY LOVE STORY

by Sharon Simonson

In the last three decades, Silicon Valley has become one of the world's most watched and imitated communities. Daily news reporters, long-form journalists, cinema and television-programming producers have crafted a public image, but it represents nothing of the lives of hundreds of thousands of Valley residents. These fabrications obscure and diminish our complex human profile and reduce our uniquely beautiful geography to a place to generate financial profits, with all the damaging disregard such attitudes foster. The essays of *A Silicon Valley Life: A Silicon Valley Love Story* seek to show our true self: our rich mix of people drawn from all regions of Earth seeking a better life in a veritable Eden, which, even in the face of violent ecological degradation, remains beautiful and worthy of our greatest care. Home and homelessness are major themes of *A Silicon Valley Life*. The research relies on the fundamental tools of all great nonfiction writing: honest and prolonged observation of human action and self expression combined with deep reading and reporting of statistical fact and historic record to render insightful analysis and conclusions within a meaningful context. The essays and introduction should be read holistically, not unlike an impressionist or pointillist painting. The result renders a portrait of the people and place of Silicon Valley far closer to the real images and experiences that constitute our actual lives.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A Silicon Valley Life: A Silicon Valley Love Story reflects the efforts and thoughtful observations of many people over multiple years. My first thanks extend to the outstanding professors in the San José State University English and Comparative Literature Department and to my fellow SJSU English students. They are dedicated and inspiring teachers and learners all. Special thanks must go to Professor emeritus Cathleen Miller, who enriched and helped me to build upon my already long reporting and writing career even as she guided the conception, research, and writing of these essays.

Additional thanks also must go to professors and professors emeritus Nicholas Taylor, Nancy Stork, Susan Shillinglaw, Katherine Harris, and Selena Anderson for their inspiring intellectual achievements and their generosity in sharing the fruits, all of which inform my writing and research daily. I also owe a deep debt of gratitude to professors Alan Soldofsky and Noelle Brada-Williams who have never failed to help me in whatever I have asked of them and without whose aid I would have foundered. They are invaluable contributors to the sustenance of the Silicon Valley literary community and thus to our world.

PREFACE

My father, Neal Terwilliger Simonson, probably would not describe himself as an environmentalist. Yet, he has lived a life close to the land and a life that has respected land's unique value. My strongest, fondest memories of Southern Arizona are hiking with him in the saguaro forests of Sabino Canyon in the Santa Catalina Mountains and through the craggy mesquite and ocotillo-covered hills above the ravines and dry river beds of the high desert west of Tucson. His love of beautiful land has never left me, and like a lost fawn in search of protection from life's vicissitudes, my love easily grafted onto the open foothills and coastal mountains above the Silicon Valley when I moved here with my husband and children a lifetime ago. I have spent thousands of hours biking and hiking these lands. They are my family.

Of course, say Silicon Valley to a hundred people and ask for the mental images or associations it evokes, and I'd bet my second-to-last dollar that not one of them cites our grassy mountain meadows and resident deer, or our oak-filled valleys carved through the eons by our quintessentially Western streams. Yet those mountains and those streams and this land are what has attracted and nurtured all life here for tens of thousands of years. Without them, Silicon Valley would not be here. Sadly, humans and our *unnatural* creations are destroying them, and not nearly enough is being said or done to stop it.

Home is a fraught subject in Silicon Valley. People without homes live in filthy nylon bubble tents, bulwarked by debris, along our creeks and in the public rights

of way above our freeways, below our overpasses, and along our on-ramps and roads. At Santa Clara County's last tally, before the onset of the pandemic, nearly ten thousand people were homeless in our county, a decade high. Our homeless residents are disproportionately people of color, and the large majority are long-term residents. Across nearly all Silicon Valley cities, our homes are highly stratified by income. People assume a lot about socio-economic status from a home address. I don't like to tell people where I live. I don't want those assumptions.

Before I ever imagined writing this book, I worked as a daily beat reporter at newspapers across the Southwest and West, writing several thousand words a week across multiple stories for years. At various times, I covered city hall, public schools, jails, the courts, county government, and ultimately business and commerce. For more than a decade after I moved to Silicon Valley, I wrote about architecture, interior design, land use, and real estate finance. Eventually, however, I believed that better storytelling demanded more. Daily journalism is crucial to maintaining civilization. But so is the research and deep thought that gives context to in-the-moment reporting.

Though Silicon Valley colleagues derided me for it, I wasn't that interested in the latest iteration of the iPhone. I wanted to understand our almost completely ignored culture and society. I wanted to explore our beautiful place and the relationship between us and it, and to do whatever I could to raise awareness of how precious our people and place is—and I use the singular of the verb quite

consciously. I wanted to interview and to hear from the people far from any spotlight who had come to the Valley from all over the world to carve a new life and to build community. Their stories, unvarnished by the massage of the public relations specialist or the self-conscious self-promoter, tell us most about humanity and ourselves. Moreover, it is a pattern of human behavior that has repeated millions of times in our Valley over more than 250 years. Today, nearly forty percent of Silicon Valley residents were born outside the United States, nearly three times the national rate, according to the U.S. Census. Not quite a million people living in our Valley speak a language other than English when they are at home. That's about 150,000 people *more* than speak English at home. At home, our people speak no less than fifty languages, including Cantonese and Mandarin Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai, Lao, Japanese, Hmong, Korean, Tagalog, Spanish, Haitian, French, Cajun, German, Russian, Polish, Arabic, Malayalam, Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali, Gujarati, Tamil, Telugu, Nepali, Amharic, Somali and Swahili.

So I quit my job, created *SiliconValleyOneWorld.com*, and started reporting and writing. People who lived across the Valley welcomed my sometimes awkward efforts to understand, granting interviews, sitting for photos. I pored over U.S. Census Bureau data, which show in cold numeric expression the passionate acts of migration by thousands of people moving independently yet en masse to our Valley, for work and the chance to feel the California sunshine—and the other masses who depart when our rents skyrocket and our roads clog.

Most importantly, I observed the real world. I traveled our streets and boulevards to see how they were changing in tune and in time with our population's growth and rising cosmopolitanism. A fateful reunion with a childhood friend, a woman I literally had not seen or spoken with in thirty years, planted the notion of earning a master's of fine arts, which seemed a perfectly suited institutional vehicle to write what was becoming, at least in my imagination, a book.

The most difficult part of my transition from hard-boiled daily journalist to a master (mistress?) of the arts was liberating my mind and voice from the constraints and comfortable confines of American-style "objective" journalism. I learned the craft at the University of Missouri School of Journalism, under the wing of former *Time* magazine editor Jim Atwater. The balanced news story developed as a way to appeal to the broadest swath of readers and thus to assure newspaper advertisers of the proper context for their important messages. The journalist became an outsider-observer, the cool hand brought to the party to keep the partisan hotheads from self-immolation, the person responsible for saying dispassionately to the unruly crowd, "There's this, but don't forget that." Your own thoughts and observations aren't explicitly expressed. The word *I* never appears in news columns. But of course, all writing expresses a point of view, and judgment oozes from every syllable.

Creative nonfiction requires the writer take overt responsibility for the views expressed on the page. The genre's bigger expectations allow a far wider spectrum of expression, both about the details of a narrator's life, which inform

judgments, and about what is felt. Freedom demands not less personal responsibility but more. Not only is the writer responsible for the legitimacy of the information presented as fact—the basis of all reputable journalism—the writer is responsible for integrating those facts into complex meaning and a defensible representation of observed events, of their antecedents and of their ricochets. It is not about an opinion so much as a deep search for the obscured, either by intent or happenstance, and a conclusion or conclusions about what the writer has found.

I have looked for authorial guidance by finding admirable work and then studying the methods of those responsible. Of all the nonfiction creative writers with whom I am familiar, one of the first stands above all, John Hersey. *The New Yorker* devoted the entire weekly news hole of its Aug. 31, 1946, issue to Hersey's 31,000-word story of America's atomic bombing of Hiroshima—an event, by the way, that had occurred a year earlier, hardly breaking news. The issue of the magazine sold out at newsstands and sparked the sale of three million copies of *Hiroshima* in book form, writes Russell Shorto, also in *The New Yorker*, in August 2016, on the 70th anniversary of *Hiroshima's* publication.

Shorto also says something important about Hersey's craft:

Much reporting had been done in the aftermath of the bombing, most of which was technical or philosophical, focussing on the power of the weapon or on the wisdom of using it. In choosing instead to report on individual victims, to follow the unfolding of their lives in minute detail from the moment the bomb fell and as they struggled to exist through the ensuing weeks, Hersey did something altogether different. He bore witness. (First paragraph)

Much reporting has focused on Silicon Valley too. At the very least, for many people, both those who live here and those who don't, *Silicon Valley* equates to *machine*. Not quite two million people live here. I assure the world, none of us is a machine. In addition, we are far more ethnically and racially diverse than the technology industry.

I, too, wish to bear witness and to show the humanity in a place that has been dehumanized in the popular imagination to its great detriment. I, too, turn to the stories of private, individual lives as the most relevant and thus most emotionally powerful to reflect the daily experiences of hundreds of thousands of people living in Silicon Valley far from the posh campuses of the technology giants and their generous paychecks. Certainly, the death and destruction described in *Hiroshima* are unmatched in world history. But humans are also damaging our irreplaceable Valley and the people who live here in horrible, long-lasting ways, too.

Based on his son's description of his father in Shorto's essay, Hersey was temperamentally suited to bear witness: reserved, deeply watchful, governed by a steady and strong "moral compass" born of a childhood with parents who were Christian missionaries. Hersey is not big on the use of the word *I*. Hersey disappears behind the weight of his story and his methods for telling it. But Hersey intended to disappear, so the reader would be confronted full-force with the story without the softening mediation of a narrator. The writing served the storytelling.

For Shorto, Hersey's authorial absence in *Hiroshima* and his decision not to promote the story by seeking publicity and public notice are lamentable. He says it has led to Hersey's and to his work's receding public profile. Shorto concedes that Hersey's approach resonates deeply with his subject matter and his editorial relationship with his material. He notes that *Hiroshima* the book had never been out of print, which contradicts his lament that it had been forgotten. "... Hersey's sensibility, so at odds with today's, suited its era," Shorto concludes.

Humility and decency, it seems to me, never go out of style or are limited to any "era" for their "suitability" as an approach to good journalism and nonfiction writing. Both led Hersey to listen and to observe over hours and days. He knew before he began that he wanted to show the human toll on Japanese people from the decisions of American leaders, the surrogates of the American people. He chose the medium of six connected but unrelated lives, a brilliant stroke of journalism that answered fully and powerfully the attempt to make the Japanese people less than individual humans. It is the depth, detail and mode of his reporting—his judgment where to focus his lens when the world was awash in thought and observation on the subject—that enabled Hersey to reach his writing genius. The story seems to transcend the storyteller though his sure hand guides the teller at all times. More than in almost any story I can conceive, the victims of Hiroshima deserved the respect of telling their own stories. Joan Didion advises the reader in the last sentence of her preface to *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, "That is one last thing to remember: *writers are always selling somebody out*" (7).

I understand Didion's observation, and it is sound counsel to anyone interacting with the American press, but I very much doubt that it is true of John Hersey.

Studs Terkel's approach in *Working: How People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do*, published in 1972, offers another route for a writer to step from the limelight while still maintaining authorial control. Terkel uses edited interview transcriptions as the foundation of his work. It might seem an author's voice would be lost in such circumstances. Terkel shows that it isn't. His voice, vital in his empathy for America's overlooked and under-appreciated workers, rises unmistakably from the pages of his introduction, where Terkel explains his methods, how he selected people to interview, and how potential subjects came to his attention through friends, friends of friends, and the subjects themselves. Terkel's voice suffuses his questions to subjects, the biographical detail he chooses to include about them, and his descriptions of their homes, hometowns, and spouses. In the book's organization, he uses juxtaposition to speak, as in "Book Eight: Cradle to the Grave," which consists of a sequence of interviews beginning with a "baby nurse," a "public school teacher," an "alternative school teacher," an "occupational therapist," a "patients' representative," a "practical nurse, old people's home," and a "memorial counselor," and finally ending with a "gravedigger" (xxix-xxx). Terkel's description of his process reflects my own experience perfectly: people are eager to tell the stories of their lives, indeed to share their most intimate thoughts and fears with a

dedicated listener in whom they have emotional trust. The human bond is key, as is preserving that trust.

I've also found direction from W. Somerset Maugham in *The Summing Up*. Maugham states in his very first sentence that his book is not an autobiography, but scholars still classify it as such. It is an autobiography of a writer exploring his craft: the genesis of story idea and character; the factors molding a story's or a book's execution. Most significantly for me, Maugham also distinguishes between creation sprung from the expectation of financial gain—"the professional writer must please" (171)—and art for art's sake: "... a specific activity that is satisfied by its own exercise" (183).

Maugham would consider nearly all of the writing I have done until now "professional." Though no editor or employer ever told me what to write as a daily journalist, entire newsrooms understand an audience and each writer and editor works with readers in mind. The purpose of all news-gathering companies not organized as nonprofit enterprises is financial gain. No financial structures or publisher expectations can premise the writing that aspires to be art. Art, however, must be intellectually relevant. Otherwise, it is decoration.

Finally, Edward W. Said's 1978 book *Orientalism* exploded an intellectual prison in which my mind had been unknowingly sequestered. Said's insights initially sprang from the "disparity" that he saw between the images of the Arab world and Arab peoples in the Western media and history books with what he knew as a Palestinian man. French, British, and American "orientalisms" are

each unique lenses, but related in that they are all mental infrastructures of bias. This bias serves and has served many interests, including U.S. and Arab governments, he says in a 1998 interview about *Orientalism*.

Said's insights apply to the production of all "knowledge." The labeling or naming and organizing of all people and places is a political act, even if the person or people doing the naming are unconscious of that subtext, and even if the people who are consuming the information via television images, movie screens, and front-page news stories misunderstand its bias. If that bias is prevalent enough and systematic enough, say, across the United States and all major news producers, the bias becomes "common knowledge." So everyone knows that Silicon Valley is full of tech geeks and felonious hucksters and that life there is about making money. Period. But it's not. Far from it.

It would entail many pages of writing to list all of the insights about my own biases that Said's ideas provoked. That said, awareness precedes understanding and change. Importantly for me, Said, a self-identified scholar of comparative literature, comes to an intellectual conclusion quite consistent with Hersey's, Terkel's, and Maugham's about how information should be gathered and people understood. Speaking at the end of the 1998 interview about what he calls "a vision of coexistence," Said concludes:

How do we accept difference without violence and hostility? ... The ideal of comparative literature is not to show how English literature is really a secondary phenomenon and French literature or Arabic literature is a kind of poor cousin to Persian literature or any of those silly things, but to show them existing, you might say, as

contrapuntal lines in a great composition by which difference is respected and understood without coercion. And it is that attitude that I think we need.

In a place like Silicon Valley, it is refreshing and powerful to hear someone as smart and thoughtful as Said suggest that a habit as old and as basic to humankind—storytelling and all art by extension—offers humanity a powerful vehicle for true community. If we can experience each other’s art from a perspective of thoughtful listening—as related but distinct melodies in a collective song of humanity—perhaps we can also hear, understand, and respect each other.

In *A Silicon Valley Life: A Silicon Valley Love Story*, I have tried to capture the “contrapuntal” stories of our people and place. As a dutiful, well-trained reporter, I’ve always known to begin all stories’ research without prejudice and every interview without prejudice. But what Said suggests, and I believe makes abundantly transparent in his book, is that our framework of thinking is often a prejudgment about the nature of reality and other people that most of us don’t understand that we have. The need is to see beyond that.

The theme of home crystalized during one of my conversations with Leily Khatibi (“Leily K. Looks for Home”). She shocked my unconscious assumptions awake with her expressions of home as a virtual place, with her expectations, indeed acceptance, of lifelong transience. Certainly in Silicon Valley, home as I and millions of other Americans have experienced it and do experience it, as a

fixed place of creature and mental comfort, is receding for a growing number of people and the likelihood of home ownership is falling fast. California has long been an American bellwether—in this case, perhaps an alarm bell. When I revisited my conversations and interviews with others, I realized that the subject of home had arisen in every single one. Hearing Leily's ideas about home made me evaluate my own more deeply. Home for me is a core value, and home will always be a place. In my heart, I wonder if Leily won't begin to hunger for a fixed address. I, too, wandered a lot in my twenties and thirties. Wanting roots and the feeling of home led my husband and me to buy our Silicon Valley home after spending the previous decade-and-a-half moving from city to city and state to state. For the first five years we owned our Silicon Valley house, more than fifty percent of our household income went to service our mortgage and to pay our property taxes. It was O.K. My husband and I have been homebodies together practically since we met.

My mother made a good home too. After she died at 63 not quite two decades ago, my father said, "I never knew how much she really did." Eye roll emoji here. My mother learned some of her ideas about food and home from attending French cooking classes, but her father also had been a butcher and a grocer in New Jersey. Though she was ashamed of her working-class beginnings, my mother valued food. She painstakingly saved the smallest leftovers, and she cooked and prepared fresh food daily. I have been eternally grateful for this model of home and to my grandfather and mother for teaching it.

When she and my father first married, my mother and her friends made the art to decorate our home. They put inflated balloons on top of empty Kentucky Fried Chicken tubs then coated both with papier mâché. After it dried, they spray-painted the base and globe one color and cardboard cutouts of five-petal flowers another color, then glued the flowers onto the globe. My mother favored hot pink flowers on top of black globes and bases. I remember those flower bouquets and even have photos that show one or two of them. My father is an accomplished watercolorist, and from the beginning, my mother also framed his pictures. An early one hangs in my bedroom: a detailed, realistic and sadly lyrical image of a zinc smelter that stood not far from our home in Fort Smith, Ark., where I was born and where we lived until I was five. I remember the smelter too. My dad's sunny seascapes of the Southern California beaches and ocean-facing hills, where we vacationed when he was in his fifties and sixties and I was a child and young adult, also fill the walls of my Silicon Valley home. They all capture moments of our lives and of an era. One day I hope to give them to my own children for the homes I hope they are lucky enough to have, wherever they may be.

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Introduction

Looking for the soul of Silicon Valley.
Looking for any soul in Silicon Valley.
Looking for a Silicon Valley soul.
Looking for my soul in Silicon Valley.

In 2017, I attended a Sundance Institute screening in downtown San José of a documentary about the final years of Cesar Chavez’s life. As a young man in the 1950s, Chavez lived in East San José and helped to restore Our Lady of Guadalupe Mission Chapel. Before the showing, the documentarian spoke of the creation process to those gathered, mostly film students at nearby San José State University. “Know in your heart what you want for (your) film,” he said.

When I began this project, I wrote in response to his exhortation: “For my book, I want the people of Silicon Valley to come away with a deeper connection to their place and to one another. I want us to look at our natural and built environments and to change our behavior to improve the quality of life for ourselves, for each other and for our children. I want us to set a worldwide example of citizen integrity by which we show humanity how to live in a manner consistent with our stated values, peacefully with other humans, and in balance with the natural world as expressed by thriving plant and animal life including *homo sapiens*. I want this book to clarify and to elevate the enduring values of the people of Silicon Valley.”

All of these essays have been written in service of these goals, and I have aspired to make each all I had hoped. More importantly—though less

intentionally—in that brief time, together they have become a record of a less damaged place teetering on radical change.

I began writing before the pandemic of 2020, before wildfires ignited nearly a million acres of mountain forest and open lands immediately to my home’s west, east and north. I’m struck now by the narrator’s innocence as she relates the pre-pandemic stories of Leily Khatibi (“Leily K. Looks for Home”), Sung Yu (“Ode to a Mother”) and Paul Nguyen (“My Friend Paul”). I wonder at her simplistic hopes for winter rain in an era of climate crisis (“How Are My Mountains Today?”) and at her borderline fantastic aspiration of relocation to southern Spain’s Sierra Nevada (“A Spaniard in Silicon Valley”).

I wrote and edited this introduction and the following essay, “Silicon Valley Home Girl,” first as I existed in a bubble mandated by pandemic, then in an even smaller bubble surrounded by fire, as friends evacuated homes and others packed their bags. For the first time since we settled here, I feared fire would drive me and my husband from our home. The CZU Lightning wildfire that burned 86,500 acres in the ocean-facing forests of the Santa Cruz Mountains damaged and threatened nearly every one of the natural preserves that I have explored and written about in the last two decades.

And then the real fires began.

They’re now burning millions of acres across California, Oregon and Washington state, largely uncontrolled, killing people and animals, taking thousands of homes. As of this moment, we have lived under a pall of ash for not

quite a month. As of today, I have not seen a blue sky in any of that time except for a few hours on a few days in the middle, when the closest fires ebbed before the super-fires began.

In four days, we will have been under some form of pandemic lockdown for six months, told largely to stay home but permitted to be outside. That outdoors luxury ended a month ago when hazardous air quality made it dangerous to our health. This morning at 6 a.m., I ventured to my front walkway for a few moments. Straight above, I saw a crescent moon, reddish through the foggy smoky haze. The sky in a small circle around it looked slightly blue. Everywhere else, it was a dull, dead gray.

Each essay in this collection strives to create the experience of living in Silicon Valley: within a population whose emotional and family ties span our globe and in an intensely urban place that yet sustains a natural world that feels omnipresent and wonderfully persistent. These essays seek to capture the rhythms of our Valley, the economic booms and busts and our seasonal cycles of rain and sun, of rebirth and quiescence, the transformation of our natural landscape from mossy-soft dewy emerald in December to hard-baked dust by September, not to mention our increasingly horrifying fire seasons. These essays seek to evoke a crucial mix of images, sounds, smells and textures to convey what it is to wake here every day and to know the beauty of our place and of our people and of our struggles and of our pain.

Some argue that we are not in fact a place, that Silicon Valley is a “conurbation” of overgrown hamlets and undifferentiated neighborhoods, in the nomenclature of Lewis Mumford. But Palo Alto, Los Gatos, Mountain View, Campbell, Menlo Park—even Sunnyvale—all have community cohesion, individual styles and self-generated centers of gravity. And, no doubt, San José’s many neighborhoods—The Alameda, Willow Glen, Rose Garden, Burbank, Japantown, Little Saigon, Naglee Park, downtown—all have unique identities. Moreover, the bay and ocean seashores that surround our Valley, and the coastal mountain ranges that ring us from above—all harbor unlimited variations of Northern California land typologies and offer public access to tens of thousands of acres. Together, our neighborhoods, towns, cities and public lands form a bountiful whole.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *topography* as: “The science or practice of describing a particular place, city, town, manor, parish, or tract of land;” and “the features of a region or locality collectively.” These essays rely on *The Poetics of Space* and author Gaston Bachelard’s concept of “topoanalysis” (12), the study of human identity as it relates to the places in people’s lives. Bachelard says he wishes to examine only “*felicitous space*” (19). “In this orientation, these investigations would deserve to be called *topophilia*,” he writes (19). I take the road map for my journey from Gaston:

(I) seek to determine the human value of the sorts of space that may be grasped, that may be defended against adverse forces, the spaces we love. For diverse reasons, and with the differences

entailed by poetic shadings, this is eulogized space. Attached to its protective value, which can be a positive one, are also imagined values, which soon become dominant. Space that has been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent space subject to the measures and estimates of the surveyor. (19)

And so, through the filters of emotion and imagination, space expands to more than the sum of its parts. All forests have trees, but the soaring forests of the Purisima Creek Redwoods Preserve on the San Francisco Peninsula look and feel entirely different from the hotter, drier oak, madrone and bay tree woodlands of Silicon Valley. Both places and spaces remain priceless. In the same manner, all building interiors have a floor, walls and a ceiling. But all rooms do not make us feel the same. The ceilings of cathedrals soar for a reason, and we embellish them, their walls, and their pillars with adoring ornamentation as metaphor. Modern humans seek forests, I think, to experience the soaring trees and their native embellishments—the lacy ferns arched over mountain streams with mossy rocks; gentle deer foraging acorns beneath the oaks; yellow banana slugs gliding soundlessly over the brown-leafy carpet of the forest floor.

My examination of Silicon Valley begins from my own felicitous space: a heartfelt regard for my hard-working neighbors and for the natural beauty of our place from shore to mountaintop and a heartfelt belief that the health and well-being of both are inextricably combined. Like Bachelard, I intend to use “the house as a *tool for the analysis* of the human soul” (21), by which I mean not only my own sixty year old ranch home and its accouterments but also the ranch

home neighborhoods that dominate so much of Silicon Valley, including the modern iterations of the rancher.

Each room in a house is a “small world” (22), Edith Wharton and her architect co-writer Ogden Codman Jr. say in *The Decoration of Houses*. Ms. Wharton’s signature voice of absolute conviction is buttressed by her ability to properly deploy words such as “buhl” (24) and “jardinière” (21) as well as such modern idioms as “tricked out” (27). Rooms should be conceived and created in a manner consistent with how they will be used, she exclaims with exasperation in the 1914 book’s opening pages. Bachelard says, “On whatever theoretical horizon we examine it, the house image would appear to have become the topography of our intimate being” (20).

Observers of nature, including human nature, have understood seemingly forever the inextricable connection between a creature’s character and a creature’s home. No giraffe would live in a beaver’s den. One of the most famous abodes in literary history is the ethereal castle of the marvelous Green Knight in the fifteenth century story *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. We see the magic of Morgan le Fay’s curse upon it and everything in it including the Green Knight and his lady. Despite its rock walls, the castle verily vibrates, and the Green Knight at one point speaks from his own severed head. In the early nineteenth century German folktale “The Fisherman and His Wife,” the wife demands ever more ornate and palatial homes, materializing her rising appetite for wealth, status and power. No level of enhancement satisfies her. In the end, her greed begets her

downfall, and she is returned to her original hovel. In Virginia Woolf's masterwork *To the Lighthouse*, the Ramsay family's "ramshackle" (190) summer house symbolizes Mrs. Ramsay, domesticity, femininity, the British way of life—the fragile force of civilization against nature's inevitable tendency toward chaos—all ultimately shot to hell by the slaughter of World War I and the 1918-1919 influenza pandemic. Another literary house that I can't forget is the glass house in the Polish forest built by the Polish builder Pavel in Rachel Cusk's 2017 novel *Transit*.

The houses at the busiest intersection on my street are disheveled. One is considerably worse than the other, and I rarely see its family outside. The house tells me of trouble with its long, un-mown grass and dying trees and shrubs and dirt patches. Now lately, the high school next door has launched a tremendous expansion, and the contractors have built their construction road behind this house. The family seems even more invisible at 7 a.m. when the huge construction trucks lumber past like hungry beasts, and the workers park their pickups on the street in front of the house, every day, all day.

What does the configuration of Silicon Valley housing in 2020 say about who we are and are becoming? Generally, we are very big and very small: big modern super-ranchers like those being built in my neighborhood and the uber tiny "accessory dwelling units" with 250 square feet per person that the state of California began pushing before the pandemic. What does the configuration of the modern ranch home say about who Californians were—or thought they were

—when sixth-generation Californian Cliff May popularized the ranch house and conceptualized the modern California lifestyle beginning in the 1930s and continuing for nearly six decades? What does it say that I feel nostalgic for the ranch home and that it and its lifestyle are worth preserving, not as an enclave for the rich but as an ideal for all who care to have it?

I also understand the word *home* in a metaphoric and much larger sense: in the sense that Silicon Valley is our home and that the elements and features of that home express as surely as the art on someone's wall who we are and who we aspire to be—or should I say who we *were* and who we *aspired* to be? Before the pandemic and the record-breaking wildfires of the last four years, Silicon Valley saw the conception and development of its first modern, iconic corporate and institutional architecture of physical magnitude and imagination: Apple Park in Cupertino designed by British starchitect Norman Foster, completed in 2018; the gleaming ten-story American headquarters for Samsung Semiconductor in North San José, with its huge open-air central courtyard and open-sky gardens on alternating floors, finished in 2015; the Google geodesic dome campus overlooking the far south San Francisco Bay in Mountain View, still under construction; the new Frank Gehry designed Facebook campus in Menlo Park with its enormous roof-top park; the new \$1 billion Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara; the new \$100 million soccer stadium next to San José's new \$1.3 billion international airport expansion; the new Nvidia campus in Santa Clara.

Nearly all of these buildings and campuses engage intimately with Northern California's historically amazing climate, fully integrating inside with outside, a plan that may prove short-sighted if our fire seasons continue to destroy our woodlands and forests, to blanket the state in smoke and soot, and to stretch into weeks and months—events that never happened in the first decade we lived here. Would any of these corporate campuses or public amenities be constructed now as they were conceived before our massive, terrifying conflagrations, not to mention the pandemic? I doubt it. In a sheerly economic calculus, the fires reduce the utility of our place. In the years to come, we may find our architectural and thus social ambitions desiccated by the disease, fire, and climate change battering the natural settings that make living here so desirable, not to mention the rising antipathy for the powerful global companies that built most of these luxurious spaces, the only entities with the resources to finance such creations, all to benefit their elite cadre of global workers.

We have the poetics of space. We also have the politics of space, and as more people crowd the planet and crowd the places where jobs and quality of life seem best, the space for each individual falls. The resistance to density arises from the legacy of the promise of the American West, epitomized by the illusion of so much space. What's more spacious than the Central Plains? The Rocky Mountains? The Great Basin? Yosemite? The Sierra Nevada? But in places like San José and Silicon Valley, those dreams no longer can find expression except

among the very wealthy. The quarter-acre beneath my home is more than five times as valuable as the structure, according to a 2019 appraisal. The real politics of space in the American West and in California are determined by fresh water and will be more so every day.

My Silicon Valley topoanalysis incorporates a personal and a community lens and understandings of the word *landscape* as signifying not only the natural and built features of the physical world but also the contours of people, including mind and emotion, demographics and culture. I ask if an enduring Silicon Valley ethos abides, or if the region's character and its values are as changeable as its technology. What are the repetitive throbs of our place: the boom and bust technology cycles; the real estate wealth; the fight to preserve the natural environment and some semblance of the historic past against the ferocious maw of global capitalism; the mouthing of so-called progressive values and the practicing of others.

Back in 2015, before the wildfires, I attended an African film festival in Mountain View that drew auteurs from Africa and the African diaspora worldwide. The filmmakers inspired me with their faith in the power of art to change human existence, and I believed with them in the Silicon Valley creation myth. As the award-winners arrived to walk the red carpet—many having traveled thousands of miles to experience the moment—another perfect late summer evening settled gently on the scene. The soft glow of twilight and celebration erased any hard edges of mind or surroundings. The warmth from their joy and the setting sun

suffused the cooling air. It was an ordinary evening except in retrospect. It seems another life ago now, another era irretrievably lost and grossly undervalued during its time.

In the past, I perceived nature as unchanging, at least within my lifetime, the predictability of the seasons a ballast against the storm of human change. It's hard to understand nature that way any more other than in the most abstract sense. Nature endures but not as I have known it. That change has disoriented me emotionally and psychologically more than nearly any other change in my life.

I undertook this exercise of research and exploration to understand Silicon Valley better and to see if I could somehow help others to see and understand what is our most fundamental value: our place. The concentration of human capital that constitutes the brain trust of Silicon Valley results directly from the beauty of our place. We overlook that relationship at our peril.

Does it matter to the health of a place if residents come and go a lot? Jane Jacobs thought so. The perennial outmigration of Silicon Valley residents and the barriers to newcomers becoming long-timers disaggregate our community and discourage emotional investment in our place and in each other. Even as we build new housing almost as fast as it seems possible, fewer and fewer of the people who live here own their own homes. Long-term, Jacobs says in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, streets empty of people and devoid of interested observers become unsafe and finally abandoned by all but those with no other choice (37-39). If people feel no emotional attachment to the land or to

the place where they live, they feel no sense of ownership or responsibility to that place or to its other people. Those people and that place are not treasures to safeguard or a beloved sanctuary. They are commodities to be used and tossed aside, last experienced in a rearview mirror.

People and place occupy the same mind space in the imagination. Stereotypes of each abound, often working in destructive tandems. Appalachia has been branded a throwaway place populated by throwaway people. That's why it has been acceptable to trash the natural environment and public health for so long. It's not hard to guess whose interests favor such branding. People who live in Silicon Valley might see themselves as very removed from the people of Appalachia. To me, our environmental degradation suggests otherwise—and it is growing worse.

These fires spared beautiful Rancho San Antonio, which lies on the east-facing slopes of the Santa Cruz Mountains. But, frankly, it seems only a matter of time. My husband and I managed a visit two weeks ago when the fires let up for a day. We'd jumped on our bikes and rushed for relief to her gentle arms. In the meadow near the park entrance, around the base of the dead and dying oaks, lay the bleached and tortured limbs that have already fallen like soldiers in an unceasing siege of drought and disease; of soil, air, and water toxins. I found myself thinking as we peddled past, deeper into the hills beneath the green shelter of the branches and leaves, "Be here now. It is not going to last."

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Silicon Valley Home Girl

My Silicon Valley home is my mother. It is my father. It is my husband. It is my children. It is my sanctuary in a world that feels manic in its change. It is my one luscious Persian tapestry, my Zapotec rugs, my Pendleton blankets. It is the ceramic tile my husband carted back from Puebla, Mexico, now mounted under my front doorstep and above the entry arch in the foyer. It is my Talavera Mexican plates, my carved Tibetan wooden chest. It is my Annie Oakley oil painting with the young, round-cheeked sharpshooter standing before a rising full moon. It is my old black mongrel dog and my scaredy cat, who curls beside me and purrs. It is my rabbit at dawn outside my bedroom window, rearranging the furniture in his hutch. We are all strays in a long line of strays who are glad to be home.

I heard a specialist on feline behavior interviewed on National Public Radio. Terry Gross asked Sarah Ellis the difference between dogs and cats. Dogs, deeply social animals, gain their sense of security from being with their owners, wherever that happens to be, Ellis said. For cats, feeling secure does not come from a person or another animal. It derives from knowing and marking a place. For cats, security is home. I am my cat.

An enormous human vocabulary springs from the idea of home. We are all almost always homeward bound at least once a day. Humans and animals worldwide build and want homes. Can we ever be home without a home?

Hometown. Homespun. Home run. Home cooking. Homestead. Homebound. Homecoming. Home girl. Phone home. Homeward. Homemade. Homeless. *Mi casa es su casa*. Is there home away from home?

I have a private, naive little hope brought on by the enforced stillness of the pandemic. After many months spent mostly in our homes, in our yards and in our neighborhoods, we in Silicon Valley are going to feel differently about caring for our place and for each other. Yes, for some, the solitude will create only the awareness that the upholstery on the orange couch in the living room, after a decade, two dogs and six cats, has done its job and has got to go. But for others, I dream that our collective commitment to our home blossoms in our inimitable sunshine. And I imagine that, in place of our carelessness, a profound emotional attachment arises for our beautiful land and for one another. We could improve our lives immeasurably.

“Wouldn’t that be wonderful,” my Silicon Valley friend Nathan Donato-Weinstein said when I shared my reverie in a telephone call four months into the pandemic. “We’re not very nice to each other,” he observed sadly. “Look at what we say to one another online.”

I have loved the Santa Clara Valley from the moment I cast eyes on it in the early misty fall of the final reach of the dot-com boom. Perhaps it was the contrast with the desert of southern Arizona where I grew up, or the dusty Texas border where I had lived for nearly a decade. The Santa Clara Valley and its mountains seemed and still seem a verdant paradise, despite our droughts and

irregular rainfall. The foothills of the East Bay's Diablo Range still glow brilliant green and soft during our rainy winters. And in the Santa Cruz Mountains, dozens of itinerant streams still gather in ribbons that flow from the mountaintops through the forests to the sea. Only the hillsides and the mountains and their valleys separate me and the Santa Clara Valley from the open ocean. I have lived in the Silicon Valley longer than I have lived any place in my life.

The roots of my Silicon Valley home reach deep into the soil. My home-loving arms enfold the tens of thousands of undeveloped acres atop the mountains, set aside for nature and natural humanity. Their east-facing foothills with their oak, bay, and madrone tree forests fill my kitchen window. Technicolor memories paint my mind's eye with their sweeping west-facing slopes, covered in redwoods and mixed forests as their hills descend to the sea. The fog that rolls over these mountains from the sea breeze brings the crisp air and dewy moisture that cools our land. In the winter, these rolling clouds bring the year's most important rains.

In the hieroglyphics of Ancient Egypt, the symbols for *house* or *town* could also mean *mother*, urbanist Lewis Mumford writes in his National Book Award-winning tome *The City in History* (13). My father, whose childhood home was fractured by disease and economic depression, built homes for a living.

My father has a deep appreciation for a beautiful piece of land. He respects the land down to the health of the delicate desert grasses. In southern Arizona, he built sturdy, pueblo-style homes, suited to the land and beautiful on it. He built to preserve and to celebrate the natural landscapes. He didn't destroy his land

with cookie cutter tract subdivisions or monstrous, self-important mansions. Nor were his homes expensive.

Land or control of land represents control of all human wealth, I believe.

Near the start of his *Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard says, "... (I)f I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming Without it, man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life. It is body and soul" (28-29). Space, he explains, is emotionally embodied, and nowhere more intensely than the home.

I told my friend Nate, "I think one of the things that bothers me most is that I feel like people just come here with the idea that they are going to make money and leave."

After a pause, he said, "I think maybe they do."

Silicon Valley is a place of overlooked cultural richness and extraordinary biological diversity, rarity, and beauty. When the Spaniards first explored our region two hundred fifty years ago, they found a much larger bay. Marshes and meadows met thick stands of oak, bay and redwood as they climbed the foothills and mountainsides. Herds of elk, antelope and deer roamed, drawing wolves, mountain lions, bobcats and coyotes. The cries of bald eagles and giant condors filled the air. Foxes were abundant and so unafraid of humans that they approached in curiosity. Two thousand pound California grizzly bears—now

extirpated statewide—munched on wild berries and acorns. It was a veritable paradise, though the mosquitos evidently were fierce.

Despite our vastly more sophisticated technologies and abundant intellectual resources, our place now staggers under the weight of our collective disregard. Since I came to Silicon Valley in early 2000, I have seen personal and corporate profit-making reign supreme as our civic institutions have faltered and failed. We wear our racism and our sexism openly. The unfettered embrace of entrepreneurial zeal has nearly destroyed a natural paradise and its most vulnerable people. The most marginalized subsist in squalor in budding shantytowns surrounded by trash. Grimy bubble tents line the sidewalk on Wolfe Road in front of the new \$4.5 billion Apple headquarters. Before the pandemic, of the nearly ten thousand homeless people who wandered our streets, eighty six percent were our former neighbors—people who had lived in the Valley for at least a year before losing their homes. Nearly sixty percent had lived in Santa Clara County for a decade or longer.

Decades of abuse have degraded the San Francisco Bay and its vast littoral. Litter lines Silicon Valley's roadways, each wayward to-go cup, plastic lid, fast-food bag, paper-straw cover, and metal beer cap another syllable in a silent testimony to our collective carelessness. We face long-term drought, and state climate research suggests that our famous, regenerating fog is evaporating. Since 2012, tens of millions of our trees have died statewide.

Our Valley has twenty two of the nation's most serious, active, and identified hazardous industrial waste sites, many associated with our proudest, most historic semiconductor companies, including Intel, AMD, National Semiconductor, Hewlett-Packard, and Fairchild, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. We have more such sites than the state's great industrial powerhouse of Los Angeles, and more than all other Bay Area counties combined. Decades have passed since this pollution was identified under the 1980 federal law known informally as the Superfund act, which sought to force America's industrial polluters to clean up their own messes. *Two* Santa Clara County Superfund sites have been sufficiently remediated to be removed from our National Priorities List. Meanwhile, toxic fumes emanate from our still widely contaminated groundwater, threatening drinking water, homes, schools and tens of thousands of residents in central Silicon Valley communities including Sunnyvale, Mountain View, and Santa Clara—all places at the epicenter of our information technology industry. The seventy five acre Northrop Grumman Marine Systems plant in Sunnyvale, polluted with PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), still makes equipment for the U.S. Department of Defense. About 710,000 people live within three miles of the site; about 300,000 people depend on groundwater within three miles of the plant for their drinking water. The EPA reported this summer that contaminated groundwater from a thirty-acre site on Ellis Street in Mountain View might be infiltrating the sanitary sewer system and sending toxic vapors into homes and commercial buildings above. The former Raytheon Company occupied the

property from 1961 to 1997, manufacturing semiconductors. The property has been identified as a national priority for cleanup since 1986, and remediation began in 1995, but the EPA says it still doesn't know the scope of the groundwater pollution or the human exposure.

Two years ago, we lived for nearly two weeks under a dense cloud of smoke from the massive Camp Fire that obliterated the people and place of Paradise, California. "We're probably breathing the people of Paradise," my husband noted grimly in the first days of the blaze. Everyone I knew was distraught. Little did we know the horrors to come. Pacific Gas & Electric Co.'s electric transmission and distribution lines ignited the Paradise fire, and the utility pled guilty to eighty four counts of manslaughter. In the decade that ended in January 2020, the utility's equipment had killed 117 people, according to a local ABC News affiliate: "Some died in their cars running from the flames of wildfires, some never made it out of their homes, and others lost their lives in a gas explosion."

After nearly a decade of local failure to replace an unsafe dam securing the largest reserve of Valley drinking water, the federal government forced our wholesale water supplier to empty the reservoir, accusing the local water agency of putting tens of thousands of people downstream at risk. New data revealed that the dam is subject to "catastrophic failure" in the event of a powerful earthquake. "Your actions to date do not demonstrate an appropriate sense of urgency regarding the interim conditions at the project," David E. Capka, director of the Division of Dam Safety and Inspections at the Federal Energy Regulatory

Commission, wrote to the deputy operating officer of dam safety for the Santa Clara Valley Water District.

The Bay Area public transit's BART has fallen years behind in its construction program for Silicon Valley even as morning and evening rush "hours" pre-pandemic engorged to three hours each, threatening to merge in the middle of the day. A narrative of this legacy of environmental abuse and degradation of Silicon Valley—and its absolute continuation—could fill many more pages.

I live in a stunningly beautiful throwaway place amidst throwaway people who the rest of us step over gingerly so as not to spoil our shoes.

The word for *home* is one of the oldest in the English language, coming in the first millennia from the Germanic *hēm* and the Old Dutch *heim*, according to the OED. In the era's epic poem *Beowulf*, King Hrothgar shelters his warriors each night in his great hall Heorot, fostering civilization with its essential precursor, personal security. *Beowulf* is written in Anglo-Saxon, the oldest recorded form of the English language. The Old English word for *hart*, or the male of the red deer, was circa 825 a *heorot*, the OED says. The fate of Heorot, of the kingdom's home, both determines and reflects the fate of the kingdom. "Nobody on earth knew of another building like it," the poet says when Beowulf first sees Heorot. "It kindled the world with its blaze." Despite Beowulf's bravery and success in battle, when he's gone, Heorot and the kingdom disintegrate. We understand that

absent the human will or ability to save the sheltering hall, a civilization cannot survive.

A thousand years later, in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, the Ramsay family house in the Hebrides also shelters humanity. The story passes through the years before and after World War I and the 1918-1919 influenza pandemic. Its prosaic events encompass but a few hours over a handful of days separated by a decade. But the house and its garden signify without doubt that we witness a civilization in collapse. We see that nowhere more clearly than when Mrs. Ramsay laments their "shabbiness" and her own. As we hear her preoccupation with family expenses and her husband's domestic and financial inutility, as we enter the thoughts of her daughters who are not so willing to sacrifice their lives to children and a husband's professional career, we see the crumbling in real time, atom by social atom, of an entire way of seeing and experiencing existence. Still, Mrs. Ramsay, the true pillar of that civilization, overcomes the entropic social forces and the threadbare furniture and peeling wallpaper of the Hebrides dining room to create the magic of human communion over good food and a little wine. Hearts and minds among the guests that had been in conflict soften and coalesce as if sheerly by Mrs. Ramsay's personal essence and will. We are back at Heorot.

After Mrs. Ramsay dies suddenly and without evident cause; after her eldest and most beautiful daughter, Prudence, dies in childbirth; after Andrew, her oldest son, is blown to bits by a shell in the war, we understand how completely that

social order has ended. But still, the house and some significant structure from that yesterday remain. “Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!” the artist Lily Briscoe cries near the end of the story, tears streaming down her cheeks as she stands before her easel in front of the house. Mrs. Ramsay is dead, as Lily knows. “Was there no safety? No learning by heart of the ways of the world? No guide, no shelter ...?” (268). Lily and we despair. Still, the house carries on, as does Lily. Her canvas before her, she is ready to paint and does paint—perhaps for the first time in her life.

In the days right before most of us understood that a pandemic was ending our lives as we knew them, a childhood friend and her husband came to Silicon Valley. We visited the Spanish Mission San José on Mission and Washington boulevards in Fremont in the next county over. Padre Fermin Francisco de Lasuén founded the mission in 1797, on the site of an Ohlone village, according to the mission museum’s literature. Interestingly, the mission’s 1971 nomination to the National Register of Historic Places never mentions the native village or the Indians, even when citing the mission population. The mission's original adobe chapel was finished in 1809. A long, low adobe dormitory was completed the following year.

Despite its impact on state history and architecture, the Spanish mission system lasted in California only about sixty years, until after Mexico gained independence from Spain in the early 1820s. An 1868 earthquake destroyed the

San José chapel and the other original mission buildings, save one wing of the living quarters, which stands and is used as the museum. In its low-lying white stucco adobe walls, wide front porch and extended roof eaves resting on braced wooden posts, I saw my suburban ranch home and the thousands of others like it across Silicon Valley. In the names and biographies on the grave stones in the small cemetery attached to the outer wall of the rebuilt chapel, I saw the foreshadowing of the waves of immigrants who would settle the Valley over generations to come.

The mission cemetery lay quiet and empty, the earth cool beneath the dappled shade of California live oaks in the searing sun. Large, carved, white stone pillars with decorative flourishes marked individual grave sites. "Many pioneers of Mission San José are buried here," the museum says. Every gravestone inscription that I read remembered the dead only for their first home, their place of birth, invariably some place far away. None mentioned their last home, California, which became an American state in 1850:

Michal Gannon, Native of Co Galway Ireland. Died Nov. 27, 1890
Aged 73 years. Mary His wife, native of Co Roscommon Ireland.
Died Nov. 26, 1898 Aged 86 years.

In memory of Frank S. Rose, Native of Portugal, born 1838, Died
July 18, 1891. Susan Rose, beloved wife of F. S. Rose. Native of
Ireland born 1836, died Aug. 13, 1901.

Maximilian Sigrist Died Jan. 10, 1884, Aged 70 Y's & 3 M's. Native
of Andlau au Val France. Erected by C. Sigrist. Constant Sigrist
1842-1916

To Jeremiah Donohue, a Native of Coollee Ballyvourney, Co. Cork, Ireland, who departed this life Apr. 4, 1865, in the 53 year of his age. This monument has been erected to his memory by his ... loving wife, Eliza Donahue. May his soul rest in peace.

In the museum, the first display case I saw featured a woven multicolor baby cradle and food baskets and a portable mortar and pestle. The text of the display's narrative card was headlined "The Indians," and it explained first the Indians's demise: "For untold centuries the first people of the San Francisco Bay Area lived in harmony with nature. When the Spanish came, this balanced life came to an end."

I learned later that the graves of the early Spaniards, many of them prominent citizens who had died at the mission, lie unmarked beneath the rebuilt chapel and that thousands of Ohlones are buried in the Ohlone Cemetery down Washington Boulevard away from the chapel complex, adjacent to the 680 freeway. Only Robert Livermore's grave, beneath the chapel floor, is marked. Outside the chapel in the small cemetery, a bronze plaque bearing the carefully wrought image of a covered wagon pulled by a team of oxen reads:

In Memory of Robert E. Livermore, the first Anglo-Saxon settler of Livermore Valley. Born in England 1799, died in Livermore 1858. This marker erected by Angelita Parlor No 32 The Native Daughters of the Golden West, Livermore, California, May 12, 1935.

While my childhood friend and her husband stayed with us, she received the results of a commercial DNA test. She knew that her mother's parents were both of Irish descent. I remember well her blue-eyed grandmother, sharp-eyed, sober,

and independent to the end. I also knew my childhood friend's father had emigrated to the United States from Mexico with his mother and older brother when he was a boy. She and I grew up next door to one another, and our fathers and families have been friends. An overriding memory of my childhood are the many hours spent at her parents' elegant Spanish mission-style house. Its thick white stucco masonry walls shielded a central courtyard with banana and fig trees and lush greenery. Tropical plants grew in dozens of large and small cast cement pots on a back patio protected from the sun by a second story roof deck open to the stars. Hot as Tucson was, the house absorbed that heat and gave so much shade that it transformed the pitiless desert into a diffused, soft existence. Her parents were both Catholics, her mother especially observant. The only time I ever attended Mass as a kid was with their family.

Despite their Catholic faith and their continued family ties to Mexico, the genetic profile revealed something that I think surprised us both. Her father's ancestors hailed not from Mexico and Christendom, but from the Levant and the lands of Islam, whose colonizing explorers crossed the Mediterranean Sea to settle in Spain in the mid-700s, then 800 years later, under the Spanish Crown, had begun to migrate to the New World.

My own Polish great-grandfather departed Hamburg, Germany, on May 25, 1903, aboard the vessel *Batavia*. A short man, 25-years-old, with dark features and light olive skin, he had the blockish head and wide-set eyes of my grandpa and uncles. He'd sailed from Hamburg down the Elbe River to the Atlantic

Ocean, and after a stop in Boulogne, France, across the ocean. He was a “peon,” according to his documents of passage. How he got to Hamburg is anyone’s guess. He may even have walked. He made it as far as Linden, N.J., an oil- and fuel-refining hub outside New York City, where he worked as a laborer along with the other Polish immigrants. My mother and father left New Jersey in 1959 bound for Arizona by way of a half-dozen other places, including, briefly, California, where my brother was born. I wasn’t born in the West, but the American West is my home, and I have lived here all but a fraction of my life.

How far our parents and grandparents and great-grandparents and great-great grandparents had traveled to deliver us to the wonderful lives that we have shared and to that moment in time in my Silicon Valley home—a moment with centuries and millennia of prologue, layers and layers of cultural meaning and influence, drawn literally from the world over.

I did not know it at the time, but it might have been the last time, and it was certainly the last time for a long time that I would sit at my creaky dining room table with a small dinner party over steaming food and candlelight. With my childhood friend and her husband, whom we’ve known now for more than half our lives, we’d invited our two dearest Silicon Valley friends to join us. My husband had cooked all day including a chocolate birthday cake to surprise one of our Silicon Valley friends. We dimmed the lights and sang in the soft caress of a late-winter Northern California night. My parents smiled from photos, my dad a lieutenant and pilot in the U.S. Air Force, my mom a high school graduate bound

for college. My creaky dining table was their creaky table, a gift from decades ago. Annie Oakley watched in calm splendor, her moon lending its light. Little did we comprehend how tenuous our world was, as the candles flickered on the birthday cake, their flames reflected in the glass plates of the sliding doors with the black night behind them.

My Silicon Valley ranch home is low to the ground, humble like the mission buildings. By some state of California measures, my neighborhood is historic, though my house is but a lowly tract home built in 1961. At one point the city where I live considered designating some of its more outstanding ranch homes historic. The notion died against resident opposition to the potential loss of property rights.

Despite its age and humility, my home still functions admirably. The extensive eaves that shade wide porches front and back protect the windows from direct sunlight. With its cedar-shake roof and pier-and-beam foundation, which lifts the house above the surface and a three-foot deep crawl space dug into the cool ground, the house breathes. Whether in the middle of summer or the dead of winter, we use artificial air conditioning and heat sparingly. Bachelard discusses the polarity of the house with an attic and a cellar, and the emotions both extremes can summon, starting with the stairs that access each. California ranch houses have no attic or cellar, no up or down extremes. They are models of horizontal verticality. The ranch house embodies calm. Life in a California rancher

feels fluid and smooth, inside to out, room to room, the world works with a body, not against. Its simplicity, easy to overlook or to take for granted, stems from its fundamental practicality. The ranch home is meant to be used.

Cliff May, born in 1908 and the best-known proponent of the modern California ranch home, wasn't an architect. He grew up learning carpentry and homebuilding from a neighbor, according to *Carefree California: Cliff May and the Romance of the Ranch House*. As a kid, May and his brother did most of the housecleaning as their mother suffered poor health. May also helped his grandparents maintain their rental properties and spent summers with his cousins living on his Aunt Jane's ranch in northern San Diego County. May backed into homebuilding after leaving college without graduating and having made too much furniture in his eagerness to earn his way. A friend offered to display the furnishings in a house, and the house sold. Soon May was building the houses rather than the chairs (11-12).

His vision of a uniquely California home rose naturally from his own life. A regional architectural tradition had begun to emerge in California in the late 1800s as designers looked to the state's Catholic missions, to Mexico, to Spain and to the larger Mediterranean world for inspiration and understanding of their place and how to live in it (24). At the most abstract, early colonial California ranch homes literally rose from the land—stuccoed walls of baked brick earth with wooden roof beams and clay tile floors inside and out beneath the wide, covered *corredors*. May's ranch homes retained the humility, informality, and

handmade quality of early California building. Using natural materials, natural light, and seamless connections between indoors and out, his early efforts featured red tile roofs and white stucco walls, but he soon adopted the modern ranch home's signature wood-shingled, low-pitched roof. He loved the large protected patios of the early ranch homes, paved with big, square tiles. Flowering vines crept up the square wooden posts that supported the eave edge. May was known to insist that the brown and white paint of a house match the ashy brown and creamy white of the bark of the native California sycamores that shaded his own back courtyard (12). May often used his family's home as a showcase of his talent for potential customers.

May both preceded and participated in the industrialization of American homebuilding, which accelerated after World War II and followed the mass production of the nation's autos and later airplanes and ships for the war effort. My house and neighborhood arose during the mass mid-century homebuilding boom that transformed the profile of our state and nation.

Despite his nostalgic posture, May was also a technology devotee. May lived in his houses and experienced the way they worked. His dad, he told his biographers, routinely brought new, labor-saving technologies into the home (11). In his homes, May adopted new technologies as soon as they became available. His preoccupation with natural light and the integrity of a home's inside with its outside made him one of the first to use sliding glass doors to replace windows and wooden doors in the patio- and courtyard-facing rooms. May's sensibilities

permeate my little tract rancher and the thousands of others across the Valley like it. Moreover, his sense of how Californians ought to live—if they cared to live well—also permeates the designs of Silicon Valley’s emerging first-generation global corporate campuses. May’s glass has become Apple’s glass—the unique, curved glass windows and sliding doors of Apple’s Cupertino headquarters and the glass walls of Apple’s retail stores—glass and its stunning technical manipulation signify the Apple brand as much if not more than the fruit icon.

I live in a home worthy of the ideals of Cliff May and Frank Lloyd Wright, of the earth and of the American West, a flower- and plant-filled respite in a sprawling metropolis. I am surrounded by paintings, photos, tapestries and art objects, many of them of the American west, collected over two decades with my husband, including hundreds of books, drawing paper and pencils, watercolors and brushes—enough to occupy my mind beneficially for years. Despite the pandemic, I can walk and bike for miles on forested paths and roads within easy distance of my home.

My Silicon Valley home is a gilded cage from which I may leave only to acquire food or medical care or to seek outdoor recreation. I do not know when the terms of this confinement will end. I am subject seven days a week to incessant traffic noise that begins before dawn and continues after dark. Despite the pandemic, two major construction sites across my street clink and clank all day long, including Saturday mornings, as massive earth and materials movers ding-ding-ding. All around me, well before the pandemic began but even through

it, people are buying 60-year-old ranch houses like mine and knocking them over to build what I call super-ranchers. These new homes often have the currently trendy, faux-rustic board-and-batten siding, harkening to the farmhouses of the early California homesteads. The historic Grant cabin at Rancho San Antonio, its first room built in the 1850s at the end of what is now Grant Road, has board-and-batten siding. The modern houses seem always to be painted white with black trim. Their front elevations often rise twice the height of the first-generation ranchers, and one sees immediately the delicately perched alliance they will have with their modest neighbors. Some modernize the existing ranchers with smooth stucco siding, often also painted white, and sleekly finished redwood boards, two other, traditional regional materials. But they also often raise the front elevations.

Our homes tell the stories of our lives, both our personal and collective lives. So does our architecture. In the last two decades, the quality of the built environment in Silicon Valley has improved dramatically, especially within the northern tier of the county's richest cities. The Valley's industrial heart continues to be computer and electronic-product manufacturing, including semiconductors, and the Valley remains an industrial powerhouse whose companies, in addition to their billions of dollars in real property holdings have more than \$500 billion in machinery and equipment on site, hundreds of billions of dollars more than the companies in San Francisco, San Mateo and Alameda counties, according to our county assessor. The Valley's tech companies have been better known for their

clunky, impersonal concrete tilt-up R&D buildings. But that aesthetic changed in the years preceding the pandemic, when important Silicon Valley technology companies like Adobe and Apple, Samsung, Nvidia and Facebook all embarked on development of expansive, world-class headquarters. Google's huge circus tents continue to find form on the marshy land near the southern tip of the San Francisco Bay in trendy Mountain View even as the pandemic rages and new, wholly unanticipated questions arise about the usefulness of such space in an age of human disaggregation.

A Realtor recently explained to me that some appraisals automatically discount the value of the original ranchers, even updated ones, compared to the new construction. I understand that calculus, part aesthetic, part modern materials and better engineering. But I wonder if these bigger, taller super-ranch houses will in fact be more livable or comfortable, more energy efficient day in and day out, more sustainable, than my little old rancher with its big eaves and modest porches.

The Dutch, the most advanced shipbuilding nation in the world in the 1600s, created the word *snug* (57), Witold Rybczynski tells us in his book *Home: A Short History of an Idea*. And it is to the Dutch, a population like Silicon Valley's with its eyes turned to the wider world beyond the sea, that we can attribute many fundamental characteristics of the American home. Dutch land was boggy, and it was expensive and difficult to build. Homes became long and narrow, were

perched on stilts, and often shared walls to reduce weight. To cut weight even more, the Dutch incorporated as many windows as possible, accounting for the spectacular light-filled home interiors of Dutch seventeenth century painting. Work space was at street level with living space above. Over time, stories were added for more living space, and domestic rooms gained specialized uses. Dutch moral values and economic prosperity—tied to their international trade, just like us—engendered key habits in the way homes were used and people's relationships to one another and the larger world. Unlike in other European cities where servants lived with their masters and mistresses, the Dutch employed few servants. Dutch women and wives largely did their own housework and favored built-in furniture, such as closets, which they believed were easier to clean. The Dutch home was one premised on family intimacy with parents and children. For the first time, the kitchen became a fully conceived room and a central place in the house for the ease of the hard-working matron. Dutch mothers raised their own children, and the children were educated, producing the highest literacy rate in Europe. We see the birth of childhood in the Dutch home. According to contemporary observers, Rybczynski tells us, the Dutch value-hierarchy ran: children, home, garden (60). German, Danish, Swedish, Icelandic, Dutch and English all have related words for home. But there is no word in Latin or Slavic European languages that duplicates the dual meaning of home in English, as both a place and a state of mind (62).

A vegetable garden that my husband built last summer on the side of our home gained enormous stature for me the morning of March 16, the first day of our coronavirus lockdown. I had walked blithely into the grocery store, naive to what awaited me. Education came quick. Two lines, twenty people deep, snaked backwards from two slow-moving checkout stands. The shoppers stood grim and mute, many clutching food to their bodies as they waited to pay. The shelves held no rice, no pasta, no apples, no oranges—no citrus at all. Scurvy anyone? No Russet or red or white potatoes, only some small shriveled yams. I grabbed a basket and began to fill it. The older man who eventually checked me out, a man whom I knew and had spoken with many times, a man who really should have been at home, told me that it was supposed to be his day off. Everyone else had refused to come to work.

After I got home, shaken, my husband and I stood in front of the garden where we'd planted vegetable seeds a few days earlier. "I told you," he said to me—sweetly and with his little soft chuckle. "You guys always laughed at me."

It's true. Our kids and I had always teased him about his doomsday scenarios. He's been planting fruit trees in our yard for a couple of years, an orange, a lemon, a grapefruit and just this season an apple and a pear. He built the box garden outside our bedroom and next to our rabbit's hutch, so we could all enjoy it. That rabbit, a stray that my older son found and brought home, showed me the relationship between fresh lettuce and bliss—and that food grown in Silicon Valley soil and air would support healthy life.

On our daily coronavirus walk a week ago, my husband saw a woman in her front yard wearing her gardening gloves and examining the inside of a miniature greenhouse.

“What ya’ got?” he called from the sidewalk, pausing.

“Corn and tomatoes and green beans,” she said withdrawing her head from inside the box. “But nothing’s growing yet. I’ve noticed that checking every several hours doesn’t make them grow any faster.” We laughed.

In our garden, the seeds germinated and seedlings grew in a number of days. Midway through the coronavirus summer, we have a dozen squash and zucchini plants, two dozen lettuce heads, and three rows of wonderfully frilly carrot tops. The light green globes of the heirloom tomatoes are taking on their signature striations and mottling. For the first time in my life I understand the tale of “Jack and the Beanstalk.” A green bean vine, it seems, would grow to the sky given the right post to climb and enough water. Its vitality is wonderful to behold. I told my husband we would rapidly starve on the rations we are producing so far: about a half dozen zucchini, two crook-necked squash, a handful of green beans, four tomatillos, and five tomatoes. But each piece is so beautiful, its colors so vital, each green bean so perfectly formed, they all seem art more than anything.

The overwhelming majority of adults who live in Silicon Valley—70 percent—like me, were not born here. Indeed, most adults who live in California, especially on the coast, came from someplace else, according to *Governing.com*. In 1900, the

population of all California was less than two million; twenty of the nation's forty-five states were more populous. Before World War II, California remained an agricultural state. According to a 2011 study by the state's Department of Transportation, the federal government remade California into an industrial power to fight its war in Japan and Europe. The state's housing shortages began when workers flocked here for defense industry jobs. After the war, the entire nation suffered housing shortages. By 1962, after massive in-migration from the rest of the country, more people lived in California than any other state, and it has remained so ever since. Forty million people today benefit from the natural beneficence of California's land, sun, sea, and skies, not quite two million in Santa Clara County alone, the heart of Silicon Valley.

And yet, if people vote with their feet, fundamental cultural attitudes toward California and the Silicon Valley are changing. Statewide, our population growth rate is slower than it has ever been since government record-keeping began in 1905, according to the California Department of Finance. We've seen less than a one percent annual population growth rate every year for fourteen years—indeed, in the most recent accounting for 2018-2019, our growth rate had fallen to a barely perceptible 0.35 percent. The leading cause? The outmigration of existing Californians across the last decade, accelerating as the period wore on. Tens of thousands of residents left Silicon Valley too. Births also fell.

Considering both the inflow of people from other U.S. places and the outflow of Silicon Valley residents to other U.S. places, from 2010 to 2019, Silicon Valley

lost 6.2 percent of its resident population. That was not quite 125,000 people, according to U.S. Census Bureau estimates. Without 152,520 people coming to us from overseas—both the foreign- and the native-born—our population would have remained flat.

Plenty of other American metropolises also experienced net outmigration of existing residents in the last nine years. A few metros saw resident outmigration at a substantially greater rate even than Silicon Valley. A net 10.4 percent of the existing population left the Miami metropolitan area—more than 280,000 residents; the Detroit metro saw more than 159,000 existing residents leave, above nine percent. The Chicago metro area lost 7.6 percent of its existing population, more than 543,000 people. A net 6.5 percent left the Los Angeles metro.

As in Silicon Valley, the mass departures from these metropolitan areas have largely been backfilled by incoming international migrants, and in some cases, by the excess of births over deaths. A net of more than 1.4 million existing residents left the New York metro area from 2010 to 2019. But immigration from overseas and more than 2.2 million births compensated, and the region saw a nearly 320,000-person population gain. In the case of Chicago, the outflow of existing residents was so great from the metro that international immigration and births within the remaining population still were insufficient to compensate for the losses, and population fell.

Silicon Valley grew by not quite 154,000 people from 2010 to 2019, nearly eight percent. But all of that growth came from the immigration of people from overseas. Our natural increase—the surfeit of births over deaths—only compensated for the loss of all of the residents who left. Tellingly, as the decade wore on and local quality of life decayed, the exodus of existing residents gathered momentum. But all of that—a rough repetition of the dot-com boom and bust including the large exodus of existing residents—was before the pandemic put a hard stop to the demand blitz. Based on the continued buying and selling of homes and commercial properties in the Silicon Valley during a pandemic and massive forest fires, people retain an astounding faith in our place’s phoenix-like ability to re-invent itself, a phenomenon I have witnessed firsthand. My friend Nate suggested our predominantly loose suburban development, unpopular and unfavored by the urbanists before now, could emerge favorably in a world beset by pandemic, and it could. More wildfires like the ones we’ve experienced in the last four years seem certain to drive people away, however. Rural, mountainous California counties and counties afflicted by wildfires lost the most population, according to the state’s most recent annual count.

In contrast to Silicon Valley, the San Francisco-San Francisco Peninsula metro also saw resident outmigration from 2010 to 2019, but at a fraction of the scale experienced in Silicon Valley, and the Oakland metro drew more residents from other U.S. places than it saw depart for them. More widely, Austin and Nashville, Seattle and Houston all saw growth in the last decade fueled not only

by the in-migration of people from overseas but also by existing U.S. residents choosing to move to those places.

I wonder about what I call Silicon Valley's population churn, the constant coming and going of people from our cities and neighborhoods. I wonder about the homeownership rate: sixty four percent nationally versus fifty five percent in Silicon Valley. Even as new housing rises on seemingly every Silicon Valley corner, the absolute number of county homeowners who say they own and live in their own homes full-time has fallen to a twenty year low—not quite 37 percent, according to the Santa Clara County Assessor's office.

I wonder if our population's impermanence fragments our communities. I believe more and more people feel less and less committed to our place, that in the back of their minds the thought arises and persists, 'Eventually I will leave, and so, why bother? Who cares about the survival of the coast live oak or the Bay checkerspot butterfly or the California red-legged frog? I'm gettin' the hell outta here anyway.' Why does it really matter that German mining behemoth HeidelbergCement has destroyed Permanente Creek in the Santa Cruz Mountains with extraordinarily little pushback from Santa Clara County. Residents mostly don't seem to mind. Or they know nothing about it. After all, they've just moved here.

Anyone who didn't live here before 2012, for instance, might not understand how much damage Heidelberg has done at the Permanente mine, how much hillside it has been allowed to butcher, its dismal environmental record, the

enlarging visual blight with which it sickens our place. If people were to read only the mine attorneys's filings with Santa Clara County, they'd find a reality that exists in a world far, far away in a galaxy somewhere once upon a time. If people didn't know that our mountain wasn't like that before, they might not be so outraged at what it has become. Silicon Valley's information technology can make us feel disconnected from our place, but physical connections can never be severed.

At one time, sprawling Carolina jasmine bushes blossomed in the spring yellow and cream-colored along portions of U.S. 280 between my house and downtown San José. Their long streamers of flowers looked like earthbound firecrackers, a natural celebration in the season of renewal. I looked forward to seeing them every year. A huge cluster of purple and white African daisies also grew naturally where the California 17 crosses on its way to the 880 and on to Oakland. The flowers have been replaced with sorrowful people who live in squalid camps beneath the bridges, trees, and bushes on the steep slopes above the freeway.

Truth be told, I, too, dream of letting go, of me and my beloved husband holding hands and floating away on a spider's filament to a remote village atop Spain's Sierra Nevada, where snow remains in late May, and the air would be so bracing that sordid city lungs might hurt a trifle at first. Except, remote doesn't exist any more, and the pandemic hit Spain hard too. And, I still love my Silicon Valley home.

So I called my friend Dr. William H. Frey, a senior fellow and demographer with the Brookings Institution. “Our population is so transient,” I said. “I’m trying to understand if Silicon Valley suffers a lack of community.”

“If you think about it in terms of successful places versus unsuccessful,” he replied, “the places with the deepest roots—the only people left living there where a high percentage of them were born there—you think of West Virginia and Nevada.” Within American states, West Virginia has among the highest percentage of the population born there, approximately 70 percent, while Nevada has one of the lowest rates of people living there who were born there, approximately 20 percent. “Most governors would say they’d rather be the governor of Nevada than West Virginia,” he said.

So population churn, as measured by the persistence of residents who live—or don’t live—where they were born, is an indicator of economic vibrancy. “There are places where people would stay no matter what it is like because they were born there,” Dr. Frey said. “But if you think of economic mobility, those places that continue to get churn are not going to have as many people with long-term roots.”

Thus, if the goal is to keep the local economy humming, and unfettered new building and development isn’t possible, the economic deadwood needs to get out—say, the people who might have been born in a place but who don’t compete well in its labor market—so new seedlings, homegrown and imported, can grow.

It is also true that people already living in the U.S., including in Silicon Valley, are likely to understand the quality of life in U.S. places far better than most incoming migrants, Dr. Frey said. That makes the choices of the existing residents an informed proxy for their perception of each place. That is, U.S. residents who are choosing to move to Seattle or Austin as opposed to Silicon Valley are telling us something, as are the existing Valley and state residents who are leaving in such large numbers.

The Census Bureau finds that U.S. residents move for fairly predictable and mostly economic reasons: divorce, to take a better-paying job, to live in a neighborhood with less crime, and to buy a home rather than renting, a well-documented and particular problem for Silicon Valley, where home prices are extreme. We don't get much credit for it, but we are building housing in the valley at an astounding rate: more than \$7 billion in private investment in new housing construction in 2018 and 2019 combined. In the decade ending with 2019, we built more housing in Silicon Valley than any other property type.

Significantly, dramatically fewer U.S. residents are moving each year overall, a trend that has persisted since 1999, when 43.4 million moved, or about fifteen percent of the U.S. population, the Census Bureau says. In comparison, in 2019, only 31.4 million people moved, or about nine percent of the U.S. population.

The California property tax structure that Proposition 13 created in 1978 could be part of it. The policy discourages home sales by repressing property tax increases more and more the longer someone owns a property. So, unless a

homeowner's intent is to leave the state altogether, all else being equal, once a home has been purchased, assuming its market value continues to rise, the more time that passes, the more financial inducement exists to stay. Moreover, the depressed property taxes make the property competitive in the rental market where the tax savings relative to newer construction or recently purchased properties can be passed to tenants. Given California's size relative to the nation as a whole—about 12 percent of the total population, Prop. 13 could be a material factor in the nation's declining propensity to move and, counterintuitively, also in the California exodus by undermining moving within the state.

Proposition 19, which California voters approved in November 2020, modified the Prop. 13 property tax regime. Supported overwhelmingly by Realtors, Prop. 19 allows older homeowners to sell a California home and to buy another anywhere in the state and to keep some of the property tax benefits of having owned a California home for many years.

Across from Mission San José on Mission Boulevard, the Dashavatara Yoga Center occupies a small wooden clapboard house reminiscent of California's frontier era. The center seeks "to promote and teach Vedantic and Hindu traditions and culture, language, and yoga for adults and children," according to its website. This is not a place to exercise the body so much as it is a place to nurture the soul, or better said, the *atman*. *Dashavatara* references the ten avatars of the Hindu god Vishnu. Indian spirituality has percolated into the

American psyche for more than two hundred years, religious scholar Philip Goldberg says in his 2010 book *American Veda*. The Bay Area has been and continues to be a major gateway. Silicon Valley is home to a growing population of nearly 175,000 people who identify themselves as “Asian Indian.” Expressions of Hindu spirituality flower everywhere. When India’s Paramhansa Yogananda published his famous *Autobiography of a Yogi* in 1946, he dedicated it “To the Memory” of famed Bay Area horticulturist Luther Burbank and elevated Burbank to a status comparable to Indian gurus. Yogananda helped lead the early twentieth century transfer of Indian philosophy to America and especially to California. He calls Burbank “an American saint” and includes a chapter, “Luther Burbank—A Saint Amidst the Roses,” about visiting Burbank’s home and garden in Santa Rosa decades earlier. Of Burbank’s home and Burbank, Yogananda writes:

His heart was fathomlessly deep, long acquainted with humility, patience, sacrifice. His little home amidst the roses was austere, simple; he knew the worthlessness of luxury, the joy of few possessions. The modesty with which he wore his scientific fame repeatedly reminded me of the trees that bend low with the burden of ripening fruits; it is the barren tree that lifts its head high in an empty boast. (Paragraph 31)

Thus, a wise man who devoted his life to understanding the ways of the human spirit looks to his fellow’s home and garden to ascertain personal character. The yogi elevates the modest house and cultivated but simple gifts of the natural world—“the roses.” In his hierarchy of values, they sit above the

manufactured silk or extracted precious gems of “luxury.” The house and its furnishings, inside and out, the yogi tells us, are a mirror of Burbank’s habits of mind, which begin with modesty and humility, leading to patience and self-sacrifice.

I myself have become a devotee of *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*. There are not quite two hundred sutras, each a sentence or two. The first sūtra is: “OM: Here follows instruction in union.” Before a pandemic overthrew our world, I practiced yoga three or four times a week for nearly five years with hundreds of others. Yoga anchored the rest of my life. Many practitioners came and went during those years; others, I grew to know. I hope we see one another again. Now, I practice alone and more fitfully on a mat in my backyard. I feel notably better when I do it, controlling my body and mind with the even intake and exhale of my breath, moving in and out but trying to stay in what a guru once called “moving meditation.”

A couple of weeks ago I was surprised during another of my neighborhood coronavirus walks, this time alone. As I crossed the playground of our local Oak Elementary school, which connects and is open to the neighborhood, I saw several figures had been painted on one of the paved surfaces. Curious, I walked over to investigate. They were stencils of six yoga poses each with its name and a short description: “Downward Dog: I am brave;” “Peaceful Warrior: I am strong;” “Easy Pose: I am kind;” “Tree: I am calm;” “Dancer: I am free;” “Cobra: I am fearless.” The only one I couldn’t do well was dancer pose. It is a balance pose

and demanding mentally and physically. I integrated it into my next practice. Who doesn't want to be free? If I'd learned the science of yoga as a child, my life would have been entirely different and better. It is not exercise, people. It is philosophy. And it is good.

In 1927 when she published *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf understood the significance of World War I and the 1918-1919 influenza pandemic, the before and the after of moments that break social continuity, if not forever, for a very long time. The 2020-2021 pandemic's tragic death tolls means that most of us are experiencing the illness or death of a loved one and the death of our lives. My work days spent at in-person news conferences, at Holloman Air Force Base in Southern New Mexico, at gritty crime scenes on the U.S.-Mexico border, touring the newly opened Facebook campus in Menlo Park or Yelp in the historic Pacific Telephone & Telegraph Co. building in downtown San Francisco—all seem of another epoch. That life of carefree intense interaction, the simple movement of interviewing someone in person, of witnessing the physical and verbal nuances that signal character, thought-processes, attitudes and state of mind—all now hidden behind a mask and a Zoom screen in a virtual reality.

In his 1987 essay, "Variations on a Theme by Crèvecoeur," the Santa Clara Valley's own Wallace Stegner explores "an emergent western culture" (116) dependent on and formed by the vast open spaces and arid lands of the

American West. To these physically characterizing attributes of our land, I would add the inescapable Western mountains. The American mythology of the Western character, inspired by this wild unfenced land, incorporates an admiration for the anti-hero, Stegner says. To my mind, that includes someone who espouses a business philosophy of moving fast and breaking things. We all know where that has led: to a lot of broken stuff. Steve Jobs embodied the type too, as anyone who has seen a recording of his appearance before the Cupertino City Council to pitch his new 150-acre Apple campus months before he died. (It wound up being 175 acres.) Jobs said unequivocally that Apple owed nothing to its home city other than what was extracted by law. Today, with its black perimeter fencing and mechanical security gates, its shiny futuristic materials and impenetrability, the Apple campus presents a militaristic and threatening exterior. Despite Foster + Partners' sunny promotional images of the campus interior and the happy language that narrates them, the campus is an enclave. It is not part of the community. It is anti-community.

The mythical anti-hero abides in Silicon Valley, too, even unto and through this pandemic age, in the person (or persona, I can't tell which) of Elon Musk. It is impossible to say if Musk possesses the self-awareness to understand how much his actions and expressed attitudes represent not idiosyncratic brilliance but new ego-driven excuses for the same old exploitive behavior.

The question for us now is: do we owe them or do they owe us? I stand firmly on the side of the later: they owe us, and that includes our place.

I consider myself one of the “stickers” (xxii) who Stegner references in the introduction to his 1992 book of essays *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*. In his lexicon of the American West, “stickers” oppose “boomers” (xxii). Boomers come to our lovely climes with the single goal of self-enrichment, to “pillage” the natural resources without remorse or community sentiment. Stickers, in contrast, “settle, and love the life they have made and the place they have made it in” (xxii).

I guess that makes me a Silicon Valley Sticker ... cat?

I think that’s an identity I can live with for a very long time.

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Leily K. Looks for Home

Leily Khatibi already knew that she wanted to leave Silicon Valley. She'd lived here two years. After earning her masters degree in digital media at San José State a year from now, she intended to move to San Francisco, though not forever. Twenty-six-year-old Leily had relinquished the idea of ever having another hometown. She was cultivating a new definition of home. Tehran-born, an architect by training, a technophile by predilection, she expected to live in twenty cities before she died—six down, fourteen to go. For her, home resided in the sunny climes of the silicon chips and electronic chimes inside her cellphone and laptop.

Home sweet email.

Home sweet Facebook.

Home sweet Instagram.

Home tweet home.

Perhaps it was her semi-nomadic childhood: “Even in Iran, we moved a lot.” Or her bicultural upbringing with one foot in Persia and the other in the Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon, and Nick at Nite. Perhaps it was her long and deeply symbiotic relationship with digital communications technology. Her childhood's most memorable lullaby might have been the screeches and beeps of a modem connecting to the internet. Perhaps it was that ever since she could remember, her parents had prepared her for life outside Iran. She studied English starting in kindergarten, knew American sitcoms better than Farsi nursery rhymes. “I always

had this feeling of alienation even though I was a local back in my motherland,” she said. Perhaps it was that most of her life already took place “inside the machine.”

“I always end up talking to people either on the phone, texting them, and messaging them in different social media applications,” she said. “So I feel like being with people is being more with the machine.” But she said that last sentence more like a question, her voice rising at the end. “I’m trying to change it,” she added quickly, “to free up time to be with people, to go out and have a meal.”

We sat in her tiny university office, shared with another grad student, lodged in the corner of an upper floor of the aging but still beautiful SJSU fine arts school, a timeless stucco masterpiece. She dug for her smart phone in her purse and snapped it into a folded cardboard box the size of an eyeglass case and handed it to me. The box had two eyeholes flush to the screen. I put the openings to my eyes and a digital ocean jostled around me. I swiveled in the office chair, and the world in the box swiveled with me. A mariner in a small wooden boat—that was her, Leily said—rode the choppy blue waves. A spiky, stylized pomegranate tree grew beside Tehran’s famous Freedom Tower while a volcano spewed a stream of yellow stars and the sky rotated. “Pomegranates are my favorite fruit. They are the fruit from heaven. That’s what they call them in Iran,” she said.

She created this reality for herself as she waited in an airport and pondered, “Where is home?” and no place came to mind. “It made me want to make this piece and to remember parts of a place that once was my home. I guess that’s the way I dream about the city (Tehran) now. What can be and what cannot be.

“My definition of home has become really different from when I moved here. It’s more internal rather than a location. So if I’m happy doing what I’m doing, I feel that’s home, and I don’t have to define it by a place.”

“Do you think you did that because you miss it?” I asked her.

“Of course I do,” she said, a little exasperated.

“But do you miss the idea of having a sense of home being a place?” I persisted.

“Yes. But I like the idea that I’m not relying on it any more. I could be anywhere, and I could still feel the way I’m feeling. It doesn’t need to be a place any more, and that was hard to get to.”

Back in Tehran, she studied architecture at Islamic Azad University. Her father, a building contractor, dreamed of working with his daughter. (Her mother was a university professor who taught chemical engineering.) But Leily knew after an undergraduate internship that she didn’t want to be an architect. She realized that she faced a decade of designing parking garages and bathroom stalls before any building of hers materialized. “I didn’t want to wait that long. I wanted to design stuff that would be quick, and I could print it as a one-man band. I wouldn’t need help from others.

“When I finished, I gave my degree to my dad and said, ‘Here, you can have it.’”

Shortly after, as a “fresh grad” she went to work in Pardis, a Tehran suburb and planned community that is also the nation’s information technology center. She received training in product design and project management at a venture-funded start-up. The frenetic pace matched her moods. She also learned about Silicon Valley. Three years later, she is a second-year masters of fine arts student at the largest public university in the region. Her first year, she was one of three MFA students specializing in digital art; this year, she is one of nine. “I’m interested in building worlds,” she said. “I’m interested in going toward virtual reality. The world that we are inhabiting is what has been for the longest time. In virtual reality, it’s like adding this fantasy layer. You could create environments where people could love.”

““Environments where people could love,” I said. “What do you mean by that?”

“Anything that you imagine can be real in VR,” she replied.

Pretty soon, the real world will become secondary to the virtual world, she argued. Pretty soon, our real world punctuated by the digital will become the digital punctuated by the real.

“My computer is my fifth limb,” she said.

What do your parents think about your yen for the virtual, I asked.

“Sometimes, they’re like, ‘Slow down. Come back to real life,’” she replied.

At dusk, we left the stately blue and salmon colored art building and walked one of the wide pathways that bisect the SJSU campus. It was late summer in Northern California, where dark settles soft and slow and finally only after nine o'clock. The sun's last heat and light softened the cooling air. These were the day's best hours at the best time of year in one of the most sought-after places on earth. As we paused under a lacy canopy of matching rows of mulberry trees, Leily observed, "I need to get out more."

A cluster of arrow-straight redwoods towered nearby, huge but infants in redwood time. She rarely saw daylight, Leily told me. "I never have the time in real life. I have classes back-to-back, nine-to-six, and then other days that I don't have classes, I work."

If home becomes virtual, what happens to place. What happens to community? What happens to community taking care of place? If home becomes virtual, will humans attach less to place and devalue the natural environment even more? What happens when your emotional support arrives in light bits and data bytes a second or two after real time, as Leily's best friend back in Iran did on FaceTime? Can the communications technologies that allow us to speak daily at any moment—but never to touch—sustain relationships over years? Will they have to?

Are we devolving into a world where home as a set physical place becomes obsolete or unattainable for great masses of people, driven from what they

thought were their homes by winner-take-all economies, deadly weather, violence, or hostile government, like Leily and her family? “I no longer consider Tehran my home,” Leily said, though she clearly loved her former home place—all her art began there.

War, genocide, climate change, civil unrest—all have displaced more people worldwide than ever before—nearly eighty million at the end of 2019, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The number of displaced people globally has doubled in the last decade, and fewer people return to the places they’ve been forced to leave. Millions more people globally are “stateless” and have no determined nationality, no secure home. And yet, they are.

Leily called her first solo art exhibit, “IRL: In Real Life” with the R marked out. In a tiny gallery on the first floor of the art school building, she suspended a bulbous light at the end of a black-and-white striped electric cord from the ceiling. From the fixture—both illumination and speaker—came a computer-generated woman’s voice with verbal emphases on wrong syllables and irregular sound tones. She—Today’s Technology—read a love letter to Yesterday’s Technology. The mood was nostalgic and a little creepy, a talking brain-voice lamenting *temps perdu* in down notes at the end of her sentences.

“This human society is evolving at a pace never before seen in this physical world. Soon they’ll transition from reality to virtual existence and live inside a machine,” Today’s Technology said. “What was not adaptable and lacked the versatility to weather this ever-changing landscape is now dead.

“ ... I blame cellular network technology for your obsolescence. ... It seems we’re all destined for the discard pile when the next shiny development comes around.”

The recording played on a perpetual loop.

The show’s centerpiece, “Counterculture,” a moving image of an imaginary woman, answered questions from her new American friends about life in Iran. Did she wear a burka? What was a hijab like? Using Layar, an augmented-reality application, Leily created her version of Iranian counterculture based on the digital artists she saw and met at the Tehran Annual Digital Art Exhibition, the artists who inspired her to become who she is. “When I saw that gallery and exhibition I was like, ‘I want to do that,’” she said. “I saw the pieces, and I was really moved. The people who would go to the galleries looked like this. They are all hippies, and they are artists in that community.”

Leily’s Counterculture wears a sheer, patterned lavender multicolored scarf draped artfully over her head and around her neck, a small nose ring, and round, thick-rimmed black eyeglasses. A diadem encircles her forehead and a row of tiny white beads dangle delicately from its lower edge. She’s posed in front of a black-and-white checkerboard woven in intricate lattice that blinks frenetically between black and white. Leily’s Counterculture looks as though she’d smell delicately of sweet perfume, not week-old body odor under hairy armpits, counterculture American-style. Except, Leily’s Counterculture swivels her face from side to side, presenting one profile, then the other, again and again. She is

imitating the movements of someone who has been arrested in America and is taking a mugshot, Leily said. “I made this piece because I wanted to talk about how the culture I am from, the people who are being generalized, and I wanted less of stereotypes, and I wanted others to see people on a more humanitarian level. There are countercultures everywhere, but since the people in Iran are just considered an entire group, you don’t see the counterculture happening within that culture.”

Leily documented her digital art using paper. For digital imagery sequences like “Counterculture,” she created old-fashioned flip books whose pages were designed to be seen fast like film frames, but back to front. “The digital files, they get outmoded, obsolete. They are ephemeral,” she said. “When you produce by means of computer and software, there’s not really a means to preserve that file. Computer updates come, the IOS changes, and files get lost to time. But we have prints from centuries ago. This is an everlasting artifact.”

In real time, she was not that interested in art exhibits and physical galleries with their limited reach. Using social media and the internet, her art and her ideas could be magnified, gigantified, extended worldwide. When she went to her first job interviews in Silicon Valley, she presented herself as a web page and graphics designer. But no one really wanted to talk about that. “What they liked was that I was an Instagram Influencer in Iran” with 65,000 followers, she said. “They were more interested in me helping them with their social media strategies.”

Back in Iran, Leily began posting her photos from Tehran on Instagram. Leily herself is small—a scant five feet tall—but her photos feel big. Evocative and sensuous, they tell stories of street life and food; of best friends and of fathers in red argyle sweaters; of autumn trees in an urban forest punctuated with modern apartment blocks; of red brick keyhole arches, of technicolor ceramic tile, of wrought-iron street gates and window grills. The snapshots find the extraordinary within the quotidian. One of her kissing her dad on his cheek will break your heart.

“Beautiful pictures,” I told her.

She’d been offered photography jobs, she replied, pride beaming behind her smile and eyes, which the photos make look brown. In real life, they glitter golden, startling and beautiful. As skillful as she was, the camera miscoded their real color scheme.

In recognition of her virtual popularity, Instagram sent her tangible, annual thank you gifts, small square calendars with color pictures of cats, tokens really. But she valued the recognition, and it taught her something important, something that drove her now. A small gesture can bring happiness to another person, and that was what she wanted to use her art to do, too. That was what she wanted to use the internet and virtual reality to do: to reach as many people worldwide as she could with messages of wholesomeness and hope.

“Why do you care if other people are unhappy?” I asked her.

She paused. “Because it’s the unhappy people who make the world an unhappy place,” she said.

Now her Instagram features photographs of Tehran and Ankara, of Manhattan, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Carmel-by-the-Sea, Lake Tahoe, and Silicon Valley. Now her photos of the Moghadam Museum and Kocatepe Mosque are accompanied by those of the Empire State Building, Walt Disney Concert Hall, of the Golden Gate Bridge and San Francisco skyline, of Rancho San Antonio, Santa Teresa County Park, and Henry Cowell State Park, all in the Santa Cruz Mountains right by my Silicon Valley home, the place where I live in real life and where Leily clearly loves to visit.

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How Are My Mountains Today

A northern breeze across the San Francisco Bay brought cool ocean air to the hot mid-September afternoon. The silvery green leaves of the cottonwood trees by Permanente Creek seemed to flutter in ecstatic relief. Summer's heat was finally relenting as the seasons changed. A girl and her mother walked toward me holding hands, the father behind with a smaller brother at a water fountain near the dusty trailhead. "Hello," the little girl said in a high singing voice, to me, to another man, to everyone and to everything. These are the foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains. They greet me each morning. They lead me home wherever I travel. They are my touchstones. How are my mountains today?

Past the water fountain, a footbridge crossed the creek below, a slim late-summer trickle hidden but audible beneath a briar tangle. Beyond the bridge, the first great climb of the trail began, rising steeply fifty yards up the side of a hill, then plateauing beneath a forest of craggy native oak. A middle-aged man in khaki shorts wearing a tan cap and a woman in a red hat and red shirt descended. The woman spoke in German; the man listened silently. Ahead, halfway up the hill, a man and two women, all wearing hats, laughed and chatted in what I believed was Chinese. I wore my own hat—straw, with a wide brim and a chin strap. Rancho San Antonio Open Space Preserve—the other United Nations. Membership requirement: a hat.

I've begun scanning the skies above these mountains every morning in search of the clouds that bring rainfall from across the sea. As California's historic

drought has killed tens of millions of trees and the land and its life have suffered through, rain has become my obsession. Red-tailed hawks, bobcats, deer, turkeys, turkey buzzards—I have seen every one of these creatures in these hills, plus owls, coyotes, lizards, diamond-backed rattlers, a red-banded king snake, banana slugs, and one black, very hairy and slow-moving tarantula. Lately I've forced myself to feel good about thick and long-lived morning fog. Today's cool afternoon breezes from the north also promised rain.

As I reached the top of the first hill, the pop-pop-pop of an accelerating Harley-Davidson motorcycle launched a last uncivil raspberry from Interstate 280. Each of my steps raised a tiny cloud of fine dust from a trail so dry it had cracked into an endless puzzle of jagged pieces. My footfalls soon made a low, steady, comforting beat. I walked for a quarter hour through sunlight filtered and cooled by oak trees's long limbs, around an outcropping above a deep ravine, then across another smaller dry stream bed, then sharply right, up a steep shadeless hill. I stopped midway to quiet my panting and to listen. I had heard something. There it was, coming from a shallow gulch beside me, the rhythm of a creature's hopeful voice.

I'm calling. I'm calling. I'm calling. I'm calling.

I hear you. I hear you. I hear you. I hear you.

Was it a frog? a toad? an insect?

The tinkling laughter of the man and two women I'd passed a few minutes earlier wafted into my consciousness, carried on a gust of sea breeze. One lady

laughed most soundly. My ears caught her joy. I smiled, turned and continued the climb to another short plateau, where I made a sharp left up another steep hill, partially shaded by oaks and fragrant bay trees. At the top, to my left, healthy green live oaks crowded a valley carved by one of these hills's thousands of intermittent streams. Out here, the trees absorbed the world's worry. Beneath them, the air temperature dropped ten degrees. As the creek traveled, so went the band of oaks.

I've hiked this hike hundreds, perhaps thousands of times, sometimes seeking solace from the days of my life, sometimes not, but always finding it. I know these trails intimately, every switchback curve, every root and every rise. How the seasons roll across the land, and how the coyote's tail is fuller in December than in May. I know the lingering oily scent of the bay tree, and the oak trees whose long limbs shelter resting deer at summer's harshest. I know the September sound of the black-and-white Nuttall's Woodpecker, its red-crowned head and ferocious beak, hunting insects on ragged bark. I know where the emerald moss grows voluptuous over hundreds of tree trunks in a lustrous wonder world after a winter rain.

I feel the land's struggle and its strength. I draw resilience from its bedrock. I see other people, feet rooted to the earth, their eyes joined to the trees and sky.

In the last year, I've seen this land's desiccated oaks collapse and die, fall in on themselves like wooden houses after a hurricane. Branches and leaves lay pitifully around a jagged stump. This day, I counted six newly downed trees,

including the long-limbed live oak at that certain sharp curve near the top of the second hill, where a few years earlier, when the historic drought had only begun, a red-tailed hawk with a brown-spotted, downy white breast had preened as I watched.

From the High Meadow Vista Point, I saw one hundred eighty degrees of the muddy-blue San Francisco Bay, from the glassy steel spikes of the San Francisco and Oakland skylines, to the tawny, smooth grass-covered East Foothills, to the tree-lush Santa Clara Valley below. Moffett Field's Hangar One gleamed tiny against the brown littoral of the massive bay. The flat, shiny black ring of the new Apple headquarters tried to hide in the canopy of the trees. It was far too big, too opaque, too reflective, too manmade.

I value this timeless panorama—the land and the rhythms of natural life in California—far more than the technology of Silicon Valley. I connect without modem or wifi or latency factor to Earth, to sky, to wild creatures and, most of all, to the wonderful trees.

Lately, I've tried to greet every person whose path I cross with a wave or a hello. Hey, we're here together, I'm trying to say, we're in this together. It is small, but I hope it helps. Prejudice arises from the devaluation of another person, from a lack of empathy, from a willingness to subordinate. We also devalue and subordinate our natural world. People tell themselves that animals and trees don't feel. When I stand beside them, I know they do. What will our natural world

look like in five years? A decade? What if this isn't a regional drought, but the new normal? How will my trees, my land, my mountains, *my people* be then?

Up ahead, the threesome speaking Chinese who I'd seen an hour earlier had reappeared on a new trail. One lady chatted animatedly without stopping. I thought she must be the earlier laugher. The man occasionally said a word. The lady wearing a blouse-y blue dress who walked in the middle in sensible shoes had removed her sweater and carried it over one arm. They were having a wonderful time. They flowed slightly to their right as they heard me approach from behind. As I passed, my eyes met those of the man behind his wire-rimmed glasses, beneath his cap. His head bobbed in recognition. We smiled.

A man and a woman passed walking the other way. Both wore hats. They held hands. Behind them, a baby in a light-blue cap sat on his father's shoulders, the baby's right arm wrapped around his dad's forehead. His mom pushed an empty tricycle-stroller next to them. My mountains were good that day.

Ode to a Mother

The first thing I liked about Sung was his name. Sung. It has the word sun in it, so almost by definition it is happy. So is the sung-song near rhyme. The associations fit his personality perfectly.

Sung's face is really his entire head, which is a large perfectly shaped oval. He wears his dark black hair cut close, and the few black whiskers above his upper lip and below his lower contrast pleasantly with his flawless pink skin. When he listens, his face grows still, his brown eyes focus, and his chin lifts slightly as if it helps him to hear every word. His teeth are small and white and straight with narrow spaces. Before he came to the United States, he had no consciousness of race, Sung told me: "I didn't know how to distinguish between Hispanic and white. I didn't know about the Asian race."

We met in the English Department study lounge at San José State University —me, a professional journalist looking to advance my writing; him, an aspiring English professor and scholar. He asked me one day what classes I was taking the next semester. Nonfiction writing and Shakespeare, I told him. He said he would take the Shakespeare class, too, and he did. Early in the semester after class one day, I realized that he lived close to my house. He told me he was taking Uber or the bus to and from campus. I'll take you home, I told him. I don't remember why I gave him my cellphone number. Perhaps I offered to drive him to school the next week. In any case, he texted me the next day: "Hi Sharon. This is Sung."

“Hi Sung, how are you? All good on this end,” I replied.

“Thank you for the ride,” he said.

“Thank you for spending time with me,” I replied.

He came to Silicon Valley with his mother when he was fifteen. Neither could speak English. “I knew only no or yes or sorry,” Sung said. They’d come when Sung could no longer stand the regimentation of school in South Korea or the bullying from classmates. He refused to be a “slave to education” and to be “colonized” by the Korean education system, he said. “They taught me how to get good grades and how to go to prestigious university. Whereas I learned and am still learning valuable things in the U.S. like how to understand a minority group, the oppressed.”

His mother’s older sister already lived in the Bay Area with her family, so he and his mom both worked at their restaurant. His older sister joined them two years later. He wasn’t scared to come to Silicon Valley. He said, “When I was in South Korea, I watched a lot of American movies, and I was impressed by those beautiful houses. You know those upstairs houses?”

His first day of high school, as a sophomore, he felt nervous. But once he began English as-a-second-language classes, “I started to feel more comfortable since we were all in the same spot.

“First I researched how to say sentences and got familiar with the pattern in English—subject, verb, and object. Once you learn a new word, you can apply that word to the pattern that you already know.”

After he completed high school, for several years, he attended ESL classes at De Anza College. The classes did not accrue toward any degree. He felt directionless, but his persistence proved righteous. He completed his first college English literature course five years after coming to the United States. In fifteen years, he's learned English, earned a bachelor's degree, and is finishing a master's. He wants to earn a doctorate and to become an English professor. He reads many of the books on the master's program reading list in Korean and in English, often multiple times. He has survived, he said, thanks to "good classmates. There is always a friend who is willing to help me."

He has now lived in Silicon Valley for as long as he lived in his homeland.

For the Shakespeare class, he asked me to help him figure out how to structure a formal academic paper—the blind leading the blind, I told him. But we succeeded, and it helped me. Later, he asked me how to process being turned down for a job that he had really wanted. It helped that I have been turned down for so many and still found other, great ones. From his first texts have come dozens and dozens of others. This one came not too long ago: "You inspire me, so I can vanquish all of the obstacles I have." I am not sure who is benefitting from our friendship the most.

When his mother and sister started to talk about returning to South Korea, he planned to stay in Silicon Valley and began working to gain his California drivers license. He passed the written exam but failed the actual driving test. He was embarrassed. It isn't a measure of your character, I told him. Lots of people fail

driving tests, including yours truly. He asked me to practice driving with him, and I agreed. In the first five minutes of the first day, he drove without yielding through a busy intersection. I watched through the passenger side window, terrified, as through a slow-motion camera, the approach of the headlights and grill of an oncoming gray SUV. In that moment I realized, thankfully not too late, that I would need to watch his every move if I expected to live or live well.

The wake-up blunder happened when he hadn't seen or understood a yellow yield sign painted on the road—it was unusual, and at an unusual intersection where the posted sign wasn't prominent either. Not quite ninety minutes later, he'd received a download of my every driving rule and practice. Perhaps he was fibbing, but he said it helped. He was a better driver at the end than at the beginning, and he never one time reacted poorly when I corrected him.

The following week, we decided to try an excursion. He wanted to drive El Camino Real, a six-lane surface road, from Sunnyvale to downtown Mountain View, the next town north. We planned to visit Books Inc., a small and suitably eclectic book shop that sold other paper goods and had a charming mezzanine café. We set out from Sunnyvale, with Sung driving. It was noon, and traffic was unexpectedly gnarly. He navigated well, changing lanes successfully and only scaring me a little bit. As we turned onto Mountain View's bustling Castro Street, traffic thickened, and I could feel that it was becoming too much. The town has become a techie mecca since Google began filling offices on the nearby bay shoreline.

“Do you want me to park?” I asked him.

“Yes,” he said.

We finally found a spot well away from downtown, with me, as usual, chattering away. Knowing myself as I do, I consciously stopped and said inwardly as we got out of the car, “Look where you are.” In the end it did little good.

Alas, the book store had moved to a new location and had lost its allure, so we ate baklava at a neighboring pastry shop to assuage our disappointment. He had never eaten the sweet Turkish pastry before and loved it—who could resist? Thank goodness, he noted later, that we had that nourishment. We spent the next two hours dripping in sweat and blistering our feet, traipsing the Mountain View streets looking for my little SUV. About half-way through the ordeal, Sung realized he’d left his coat and house keys on the back seat. By then, we feared the car had been stolen. But he was a perfect gentleman—a perfect person—throughout.

Finally, in exasperation, I called the police. They assured me I was not the only one confused by the narrow streets crowded with turn-of-the-century Craftsman Bungalow, Queen Anne and Spanish Mission style homes alongside newer ranchers and, increasingly, modern condominium and apartment blocks. The car, it turned out, was one block to the south—less than fifty yards but out of sight—from where we’d finally capitulated. As the driver and car owner, I felt pretty strongly that it had been my responsibility to remember where I had parked. I felt a little sheepish—O.K., more than a little—that I was supposed to

be teaching him to drive, and I couldn't even keep track of the car! The next day, in a burst of gratitude to him for not making me feel like the total idiot that I knew myself to be, I sent him a text: "Thank you for your kindness yesterday. You were really great, and I deeply appreciate it."

"Thank you," he replied.

That is another thing about Sung: he knows how to take a compliment.

Later that night, he sent me another text: "To be honest, I hope that we will have more precious days like yesterday in the future." He sent it twice, probably by accident.

The next day, he sent this: "'Friendship is getting into her car even though her driving makes you fear for your life.' This is something you would say to me. Haha."

Sung loves good food. He exercises, he told me confidentially, only so he can eat more. We went to the Korean grocery store that anchors one end of Silicon Valley's Koreatown, which I'd learned about only recently from Sung; he, his mother and sister lived in an apartment nearby. "The real Koreatown," he explained to me, "is in L.A."

This Koreatown is small and compact and dominates only a short section of El Camino on either side of Lawrence Expressway where Santa Clara abuts Sunnyvale. In the mid 2000s, a group of Korean business owners with big upscale dreams wanted the city of Santa Clara to designate a Koreatown with

signs along the El Camino. But the larger community shouted the idea down as “divisive,” L.A. Chung wrote in *The Mercury News*. The City Council accepted city staff opinion that the city didn’t control El Camino, as technically, it was state Highway 82, and the state wasn’t likely to approve any sign, and that was it. Since then, Santa Clara and Sunnyvale have transformed demographically in tandem with tech’s global industrial expansion. Now, a handful of Korean restaurants and food shops exist alongside many others including Nirvanaah! Indian restaurant, Tanto Japanese restaurant, Rava V Thai restaurant, Carl Jr.’s, and the Cherry Orchard Inn, a two-star hotel with free Wi-Fi. Sung and I were going to visit the Han Kook supermarket. The store’s name means South Korea, he said.

“So *kook* means Korean and *han* means south?” I asked.

“No,” he said, “not exactly. No one thinks of North Korea when thinking about Korea, do they? Better written, he said, it would be ‘Han Gook,’ which means Korea.”

Inside, the store was large, well lit, and sparkling clean, not entirely a world apart, as it felt when I entered a Ranch 99 Market where little or none of the labeling or packaging was in English. Still, it wasn’t your Northern California Safeway. An entire aisle was devoted to different brands and types of tea. In the produce section, everything was carefully labeled by hand in black marker in Korean and in English. The large, round, yellow-green Korean pears were

individually wrapped. A small sub-store sold clothing. The light pink butcher paper inside the gleaming cases cast a warming softness. Ahhh.

As the noon hour approached, the aisles filled with people. I assumed most shoppers were Korean. No, Sung corrected me. There are Korean people here, but also a white guy—I hadn't seen him—and Chinese, Japanese and Filipino shoppers. "I can't see those distinctions in people's faces," I told him.

We came upon a small central court where three buffet kiosks offered two dozen, mostly savory dishes. "I love all of this food," Sung told me with a bit of longing in his voice. His favorite salad was pickled cubed radishes. "It tastes like sweet pickles," he said. It was also pink, which made me want to giggle. "They've colored it," he said. "It's usually yellow or white."

He also loved the seasoned garlic stems, a couple of trays over. The dish looked like green beans in tomato sauce, but it's really the garlic-plant stems in a chili pepper paste. On the other side of the radishes were "seasoned small octopus," another Sung favorite, and seasoned squid, seasoned raw crab, and seasoned clams. Do you eat here a lot, I asked him. Oh no, he said. His mother made all of this food at home and only bought here when she was feeling "lazy."

"You're going to miss your mother's cooking when she's gone," I said.

"Yeah," he agreed wistfully.

"Have you ever tried kelp? I like kelp," he said as we passed outside through the front door, dodging a palette stacked waist high with ten-pound bags of rice. Cars were waiting for our space in the parking lot.

He talked about renting a room in someone's house if he could find nowhere else to live after his mother and sister left. "You can't sleep in a house with someone you don't trust," I told him. "You don't want to be worried about getting stabbed in the middle of the night." It was perhaps a bit dramatic, but the point remained. He was quiet.

How will you make the decision whether to stay in the United States or return to Korea after you earn your doctorate, I asked him. It depended on his ability to get permanent U.S. citizenship or residency, he said. His sister has returned home and has sent word of South Korea's digital superiority relative to the United States, and he admits his homeland has probably changed some for the better since he lived there. He's also been disillusioned some by actual life in Silicon Valley and the United States, especially the California DMV and Donald Trump. Still, he knows he wants to stay. He values all he's learning at San José State and the kindness he's encountered. "I feel more comfortable here," he said. "I felt isolated in Korea."

He hopes to spend the rest of his life making his mother happy. She had done so much for him, he said. Under the same circumstances with one of my sons, I wondered if I had it in me to overthrow my entire existence, to move to another country where I did not speak the language, and to re-create my life. I tried to give myself the benefit of the doubt. Still, I deeply respected his gratitude, and his mother.

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My Friend Paul

Paul Nguyen's given name is Vu.

"What does your name mean in Vietnamese?" I asked him one day in a text.

"My name, long story of my life," he texted back. "Vu mean storm, wonderer, windy & rainy, or the guy move from here to move around, living like Mongolian, or medle east on the back of Camel. Depend on what to belong, example verb, adjective, noun or adverb."

How could his mother have known, I wondered, that his life would be that of a Vu.

We'd met several years earlier at a protest rally in downtown San José. Tam Nguyen, one of San José's first Vietnamese American council members, and like Paul, a refugee, had told me about the Vietnamese people who'd begun marching in front of City Hall every Saturday evening. They were protesting what they believed was Chinese and Vietnamese government culpability for a huge chemical spill that had decimated Vietnam's north-central coast, killing millions of fish, squid and other sea animals. The Vietnamese government had said months earlier that it would seek \$500 million in restitution, but devastated villagers still waited. I wanted to write a story for my website, *SiliconValleyOneWorld.com*, about the spill and the San José protestors.

The fifty or so marchers had started at the same hour as a counterpart protest group in Vietnam. They formed a circle in the open plaza below City Hall and its futuristic rotunda and waved American and South Vietnam flags. Paul had worn a

sandwich-board sign that said “Choose Fish, No Communists.” Crackly renditions of the U.S. and South Vietnam national anthems had played through a portable speaker. Everyone had sung a spirited rendition of “Proud of Vietnam,” a song marchers told me that all of their country people knew. Tam presided, saying everything first in Vietnamese and then in English. It looked like work. Protesters were serious and had worked hard, too. Yet, every photo I have of the event shows people smiling and laughing, me along with them.

Ever alert, Paul had gotten my husband to take our photo together using Paul’s phone. In the picture, he wears baggy jeans with a cap on his head backwards. When I’d asked his name, he’d taken my pad and pen and written, “Nguyen (Paul) Pablo” in large elaborate script. I’d given him and many others my calling card. The next day, he’d sent me a text.

“Hello! I’m Paul, we met together at City hall. I’m glad to see you when you guy come with us. If you have time to set up see me, I’ve got one thing telling to you as soon as possible!” He’d posted the message beneath our photo, both of us smiling. Ever the curious reporter, I’d agreed to meet him several days later in downtown San José.

Vietnamese refugees came to Silicon Valley in large numbers after the 1975 fall of Saigon, drawn by good jobs in the electronics industry. “The men were the technicians, and the wives were the assembly (workers),” Tam Nguyen had told me. At age nineteen, Tam had been, like Paul, part of that post-war flight to the United States, in Tam’s case to Michigan then Kansas and finally San José.

Today, San José's Little Saigon resides in a bustling snarl southeast of downtown, where, using eminent domain, it was pushed from downtown proper in the early 2000s under the guise of downtown redevelopment. The city condemned multiple properties—including many owned by Vietnamese people—for a Symphony Hall or other “civic” project. But the music house was never built, and the city later sold the land to a developer for high-rise housing.

The San José demonstrators wanted to overthrow the Vietnamese government, which they believed was controlled by the Chinese Communist Party. Based on the ages of the marchers, most were early post-war refugees like Paul and Tam. Of the nearly 140,000 Silicon Valley residents today who identify themselves as Vietnamese or Vietnamese American—one of the largest Vietnamese populations in the nation, according to the Census—more than eighty percent say that they still speak Vietnamese at home and about half say they can speak English less than “very well.”

Paul was reading a Vietnamese newspaper at a cafe table outside the eight-story Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library when I arrived. The sun and air were just warm enough for us to sit beneath the papery-leaved California sycamores that line Fourth Street. The setting was as idyllic as downtown gets. His mind still in the news columns from his homeland, Paul began speaking of life in Vietnam. He described people's viciousness after 1975: “They have to do like that for survive because if they don't do like that they can't survive under communist regime,” he

said, pointing to his temple. "They want the Vietnamese people to become no brain."

"Brainwashing?" I said.

"Brainwashing," he replied.

After listening for a few more minutes, I said, "Tell me *your* life story."

He paused. "I never talked me myself to somebody else," he said. "If you want, I talk a little bit."

So I listened and learned in the California sun of one man's anguish at the loss of his country. Nearly forty years after he'd fled, Paul still loved the Republic of Vietnam, born in 1955 and dead twenty years later. His country was beautiful, an early Singapore, Paul said. "South Vietnam, it looks like freedom. It looks like here. But North Vietnam, they look like they want to kill all of South Vietnam. They want the land."

Paul was born in 1956, just after the French had left the fractured country following a century of colonial rule and the United States had stepped into the breach. His father, a soldier, had already died in the hostilities between the north and south. Villagers shunned his mother, who was presumed unfaithful based on the timing of Paul's birth months after his father's death. She could barely read or write, and they had little family support. "She suffer a lot. She very poor," Paul told me.

His father's extended family and his brother ostracized him as a bastard until Paul's likeness to his father became undeniable. "When I am ten years old,

twelve years old, they come, and they accept me that I belong to them. O.K. No problem,” he said. “I don’t want to bother. It’s the past the past. But I remember. They look like they look down on me a very, very long time.”

He attended the elite Lasan Catholic elementary school in Saigon from age five until age ten, working to pay his own tuition and to buy books. The first book he bought was a history of St. Peter, the first pope. The second book, of course, was of the life of St. Paul. He considered becoming a monk. He also learned some English, and school exams confirmed a language aptitude.

“I really learned English from the American soldiers,” he told me. “I not scared, and I come up and talk to them. The Vietnamese people, the child, the kid, they are very scared, and they not come up and talk to the American G.I.s.”

“Why do you think you did?” I asked him.

“I don’t know,” he said. “But maybe I was lonely from the beginning. It looked like nobody help me.”

He began traveling with the U.S. Army 41st Signal Battalion in the mid 1960s when he was eleven or twelve, based in part on his English skills. He helped to scout locations for military communications equipment. He worked part time and attended various schools the rest, sometimes in the morning, sometimes in the afternoon. He earned “red dollars,” special U.S. currency circulated in Vietnam during the war. Over the summers, he lived and traveled with the battalion, sleeping on base and in the jungle, sometimes away from his mother and her

home for a month or longer. “Sargent Major Hunt, he like my adopt daddy,” Paul said. “That guy very powerful, and I follow him, and he took me everywhere.”

In 1968, Hunt offered to help him migrate to America, but Paul did not want to leave his mother. He also believed South Vietnamese military strength could secure the fledgling nation’s borders. He had another chance to leave in 1973 and again declined. He was eighteen years old when Saigon fell in April 1975. He was arrested on suspicion of aiding the former enemy and believed he would be killed if his service to the U.S. Army became known. He was handcuffed and his ankles were chained to the ground. He could not stand, was allowed to bathe only once a month, and was fed “like a dog.”

“They want me to confess to everything. I say, ‘O.K.,’ but I know when I open my mouth that I die,” he said, smiling. “So I keep my mouth shut, O.K.?” He laughed. “They talk good for you. ‘You confess, we release you,’ but no. When you confess, they want more and more. They send me to the north and keep me ten or twenty years.” After six months in government custody, he was released.

He’d started a business selling beer, soda and ice, and it was doing pretty well despite the ubiquitous poverty. “Vietnam very hot, and ice very good,” he said, laughing. In 1977, he married and the next year had a baby girl. But the government continued to watch him—“I know. I could feel it,” he said—and he feared for his life.

“In front of my eyes, they kill people for no reason. They kill monks. That is the communist way. They put you in jail, and they never tell your family where

you are. My wife, a lot of her family was with the South Vietnamese army, and they were sent to the North Vietnamese prison,” he said.

“I tried to leave away Vietnam many times. I go by boat, failed, and they put me in jail one-and-a-half year, and later they released me, and my life go very, very hard.” Even after his wife became pregnant with his son, he said, “I have to go.”

In 1979, he finally made it to Cambodia, which the Vietnamese government had invaded in the wake of the murderous rampage of dictator Pol Pot. “When the nighttime come, very scary. You can smell the bodies rotting in the capital of Cambodia (Phnom Penh), and in the villages it would be worse,” he said.

“Do you have nightmares?” I asked him.

“No,” he said. “My mind very strong. I know it. What happened, I suffer, but my mind figured out everything so fast. You cut your hand, you have to heal right away. You can’t keep it inside, not too much. Too heavy. You have to get it out.”

From Cambodia, he fled on foot with four companions to Thailand, but they were captured in the forest by soldiers embroiled in the hostilities between Cambodia and Vietnam. “At that time my life not mine,” he said. “My group had one person talk back to them, and they killed him right away.” The sound of the shot brought dozens more soldiers from the underbrush, and he had an AK-47 pointed at his head. After several months, his captors released him and the others in exchange for supplies of rice. He applied for refuge in the United States, finally arriving in Southern California in his early twenties. “I want to

attend the Army, but they not accept me. They say I don't have enough English," he said. He worked two jobs for a decade to support himself and his family still in Vietnam. His son and daughter eventually came to the United States and lived in Southern California. "I love Jesus because he stand up, and he fight and he die for people," Paul said. But since 1975 he hadn't gone to church or embraced any institutional religion. He saw neither Buddhist monks nor Catholic priests in South Vietnam fight the invading North Vietnamese even as their parishioners were wounded and killed.

His sad history had ended with the saddest moment of all. He was facing homelessness. An eviction hearing in Santa Clara Superior Court had been set for a week later. A 2004 marriage to another wife had ended in divorce and strife, and now she, her daughter, and her daughter's husband—people with whom Paul had once shared a San José home and life—were seeking full ownership of two San José houses that Paul believed he partially owned. He was living in one. This, I realized, was the urgent news Paul had wished to share.

Only in the last fifteen years has the Vietnamese electorate in Silicon Valley coalesced enough to gain local political power, led first by the oldest generation of refugees and increasingly now their children, some U.S.-born, some not. In 2005 Madison Nguyen, who came to the United States at age four as a boat child, became at age thirty the first Vietnamese American elected to the San José City Council, from the city's Eastside District 7, the same district that

subsequently elected Tam. (Nguyen is the most common Vietnamese surname by far, and none of the people with the name Nguyen in this story are related.)

Madison Nguyen had shot like a comet across the Silicon Valley night sky in the early 2000s, rising from obscurity to a seat on a local school board and then to the San José City Council, where she eventually had ascended to vice mayor. But by the time she left public office in 2014, a critical and vociferous faction of the Vietnamese community had nearly extinguished her light. Madison had had the temerity to *disfavor* using the label *Little Saigon* to designate a proposed Vietnamese shopping district. The name of the former capital city of South Vietnam is a sacred symbol of all that many in San José and the Vietnamese community have lost. She was subject to burning constituent vitriol and a bitter voter recall. Her father, a soldier in the South Vietnam army, had to defend her against charges of communist sympathies and covert ties to the current Vietnamese government by producing documents affirming his own military service for the defeated South. Madison and the rest of the City Council were sued by a Northern California Vietnamese community organization and accused of violating the state's open meetings and open records acts in contemplation of the business district's proposed name. A judge later said Madison was guilty of political "miscalculation" not malfeasance, but that the accusations of violations of open government were founded.

“It was torture,” Madison Nguyen told me one day several years after the recall. “People the age of my parents and my grandparents were saying, ‘We no longer trust you, and we regret that we ever supported you.’”

Paul and I sat on a wooden bench outside the courtroom a week later. In the third-floor hallway of the decrepit Santa Clara County Superior Court building where Silicon Valley administers her version of justice, his head hung low. “I stupid. I have a soft heart, and it makes me stupid,” he said, touching his chest with his left hand and then his temple.

He carried a black canvas briefcase that was zippered closed over what I later saw were paper files and merchandise receipts. In the courtroom, he sat quietly with his left leg crossed over his right and his hands folded in his lap. He exhaled audibly and his checks distended slightly. His attorney wasn’t present. I mentioned that he had a right to a Vietnamese interpreter, and Paul immediately petitioned the bailiff.

“You have to ask ahead of time,” the bailiff said grumpily. But a few minutes later, an older man with a full head of white hair and a firm left-side part entered the courtroom wearing a black jacket with dark pants and black horn-rimmed glasses. Behind the glasses his eyes were like dark brown marbles. We looked at one another with interest. But Paul’s former wife and stepdaughter failed to appear for the hearing, even though they had filed the suit. Santa Clara County

Superior Court Judge Derek Woodhouse dismissed the case “without prejudice,” allowing it to be refiled.

Afterwards Paul and I sat on benches in the scant shade of a sickly magnolia in the crumbling concrete plaza outside the courthouse. “They not show up because they feel guilty,” he said. “They cannot do that to me because my ex-wife, I think she ashamed.”

“Why did you fall in love with her?” I asked him.

“She so poor,” he said. “I saw them (her and her daughter), and they didn’t have toilet to go poo-poo, and their house only around a hundred square feet, in Thủ Đức in Vietnam, and sometimes she doesn’t have food to eat and no scooter to ride. I suffer a lot. Inside my mom, I suffer already when I be born, I suffer a lot like that. I understand when the people like me, how much they suffer, so I’m an easy guy.”

After they married in Vietnam, Paul had arranged for both his wife and her daughter to come to the United States legally the next year. In 2010, he and his wife had bought a deteriorating East San José home together. Paul applied his construction skills to the house, and lived with his wife, her daughter and the daughter’s future husband as a family. When his wife refinanced the house, Paul’s name did not appear on the new title document, a fact he said he didn’t realize.

He pulled an electronic tablet from the briefcase and opened it to reveal photographs of a home interior. “I make very beautiful this bathroom,” he said

sadly, lingering over each photo. The light gray walls of the bathroom looked like cooled butter, smooth, lovely, and soothing to the eye. “I do a lot of things beautiful, and they never thank me or pay me back a cent.”

“I give to them a lot,” he said. “I don’t know why she do like that to me. I do not understand why she do that to me.”

Two weeks later, Paul texted. A new eviction hearing notice had arrived in that day’s mail. He was to appear before the court a month later. A day or two after, he’d sent pictures of himself and a homeless friend with a huge trash pile they’d collected from the streets of East San José. “Twenty-four, twenty-five years ago, I come here, and San José very clean and very beautiful,” Paul had told me one time. “But right now, it’s very dirty.”

He’d taken the garbage to the dump in his truck and paid the disposal fee, he said. At first I was surprised. Why wasn’t he frantically trying to find another place to live? I remembered something he’d told me outside the courthouse. “I’m a giver, not a taker. That’s the way I do ’til I’m young until now.” That Saturday night, he’d returned to the weekly protest march outside City Hall—twenty-six Saturdays and counting. And the next day he was among the 150 or so people, nearly all Vietnamese, who attended the unveiling of the new Vietnamese American Community Center in East San José.

I use the word *new* very loosely in this context. The name was new, but the building definitely was not. It was raining ferociously, and putty-colored institutional plastic trash cans had been placed beneath several leaks in the roof.

Clusters of red, white, blue, and yellow balloons decorated the largest gathering room, which still proved insufficient for the overflow crowd. No one—not San José Mayor Sam Liccardo, not Council member Manh Nguyen, not Council member Tam Nguyen, not the members of the crowd—no one acknowledged the building’s condition other than to assert that it was a “temporary” home.

Across one long wall, someone had framed and hung a large piece of art in which the sacred South Vietnam flag and its bright yellow ground with three red stripes merged with the American flag and its red and white stripes. State Sen. Janet Nguyen, a Southern California Republican and a historic figure among Vietnamese Americans, made a special appearance. “I have to say from Orange County, we envy and are extremely jealous,” she said, her words, face and manner suggesting a friendly rivalry and competition between San José’s Vietnamese people and the more than 200,000 Vietnamese Americans living across Orange County. What a prize.

In *The Sympathizer*, the 2016 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Vietnamese American author Viet Thanh Nguyen—who grew up in San José— the narrator is the son of a French monk who never acknowledges paternity. His peasant mom, whom he loves deeply, dies at age 34, never really having lived. Both the narrator and his mother are ostracized. In the book’s second paragraph, the narrator observes that the April 1975 fall of Saigon and South Vietnam to communist North Vietnam “meant everything to all the people in our small part of

the world and nothing to most people in the rest of the world.” The narrator, a killer and a spy with a conscience of sorts, able to empathize with others, laments the global callousness that has tolerated Vietnamese suffering and ignored Vietnamese voices over more than forty years. He assigns culpability to the Chinese, the Soviets, the French, and the Americans but also to the Vietnamese themselves, for turning on one another. The last line of the book is: *“We will live!”*

In the book, Claude, an American CIA operative in South Vietnam, tells a South Vietnamese general in the days before Saigon’s fall, “Officially, there’s no evacuation ... because we’re not pulling out any time soon.

“The General, who hardly ever raised his voice, now did. Unofficially, you are abandoning us, he shouted. All day and night planes depart from the airport. Everyone who works with Americans wants an exit visa. You have evacuated your own women. You have evacuated babies and orphans. Why is it that the only people who do not know the Americans are pulling out are the Americans?” (7).

The day Paul and I met in front of the library, one of the first things he said to me was: “In ’74, the American government betrayed South Vietnam. You know that, right?” I stayed quiet. No, I did not.

The court had scheduled six hearings for the same time on the same morning as Paul’s second eviction hearing. We both arrived at the courthouse early and

watched silently as the hall outside the courtroom filled with attorneys, mostly gray-haired white guys in expensive but not new suits, and their clients, a wide assortment of global humanity. An Indian family of five, the patriarch of which was a grocer, looked somber. Paul put his head on my shoulder briefly a couple of times. The judge would later evict the Indian family from their store at the behest of their landlord.

In the moments in the courtroom before 9 a.m., the bailiff reminded everyone to speak loudly for the deaf judge—telling the same this-is-the-only-time-you-will-ever-be-able-to-yell-at-a-judge joke as last time. Judge Woodhouse trundled in. He would die in his sleep within a year, plagued by chronic ill health. A Canadian by birth, Woodhouse had emigrated to the United States, joined the Army and served two tours in Vietnam, according to the *Mercury News*. The Indian grocer's case was the one immediately before Paul's, and like Paul, the defendant had no attorney present. The grocer spoke English with a heavy Indian accent. Judge Woodhouse's eyes darted constantly to a monitor on his desk where he appeared to be reading a transcript as the court reporter typed it. He evicted the Indian grocer.

When Paul's case came before the court, his former stepdaughter and her attorney, Robert Anderson, moved to the plaintiff's table. Paul and the Vietnamese interpreter, a big-bellied fellow with close-cut black hair, sat at the defense table.

The judge was initially befuddled and clearly exasperated by the Vietnamese names and the proliferation of “Nguyens” among the parties, and at first, events seemed to flow in Paul’s favor. The judge questioned a chain of three title changes on the house in quick succession, then scrutinized a handful of documents that Paul and the opposing side had presented. At 11:20 a.m., the judge’s eyes darted to the courtroom clock. A few moments later he complained to the stepdaughter’s attorney: “Mr. Anderson, this is far more complicated than we can handle on this kind of calendar.”

But lawyer Anderson rallied, and when Paul motioned for the court’s attention, nudging the translator, who said, “May I say something?” the judge was reading intently and did not respond. Then, waving the papers in front of himself as if to clear his confusion, the judge ruled abruptly. “The exhibits are ordered returned to the parties. Judgment for the plaintiff as requested,” he said.

“Your honor, I have ...” Paul began.

But the bailiff stepped in front of Paul. “He’s already made his judgment. You are being evicted.”

Afterwards, Paul wasn’t upset. “Are you going to be homeless?” I asked him.

“I get a room, maybe.”

“But do you have money to pay for a room?” I pressed.

“Yes,” he said, but he didn’t think it would come to that. His attorney had assured Paul that he would prevent his immediate eviction even if Paul lost today.

“Your attorney, is he charging you an arm and a leg?” I asked.

“No,” Paul said, “but he has some work he wants me to do on his house” and laughed.

We reached my parked car. Even if he lost everything, he reminded me, he would be no worse off than when he arrived in the United States. “I already had an AK-47 pointed here,” he said, his left index finger inside his left ear.

A day later, he sent me a text: “Don’t worry for me too much. Today, it’s just starting, we’ve alots of things to do forward.” He thanked me for helping him, then counseled against being angry at his former wife and stepdaughter. “Don’t got madded them, they’re lost the humankind. Get up & try, Sun is rise again tomorrow !!!!! Paul.”

Other responsibilities overtook me—work, family, dinner, pets. Then the following week past 10 p.m. on Thursday night, the thought came to me that he had been evicted despite his confidence. I realized I had been too sanguine and complacent in believing that his attorney would avert this outcome. At 7:11 a.m. the next morning, I sent him a text message: “Are you OK?”

“Good morning Sharon! I’ m very sad, they kicked me out of my house already. I’m ok. Thanks.”

“Do you have a place to live?” I texted back.

“Dear Sharon! Not yet! Last night I slept in my truck. Thanks. Paul.”

I was at once grateful that he has a truck to sleep in and overcome with uncertainty. I went online to research places for him to live—single-room occupancy apartments owned and managed by Charities Housing. Not only were they all full, the waiting lists were full. They weren't taking any more names. I emailed the manager of one complex to ask what she suggested he do. She emailed me back that she might be opening up her waiting list in the next few weeks, so to keep trying her.

Housing is such an issue in Silicon Valley I always offer shelter to friends in transition or during hard times. It seems especially piggish to have available beds or space and not to share when people have need. The right kind of house guest also can cut the routine, can make cooking dinner and cleaning up fun. Add a cake, and it's a party. Knowing my own fortunate history behind owning a Valley home, I feel that I especially owe it to the universe to share. I thought about why I hesitated to offer to have Paul live with me until he got back on his feet. In the immediate few days the issue was that my husband was out of town. More deeply, our family was already under stress. Neither my husband nor I had a job, which wasn't an immediate catastrophe but was unsustainable. More deeply than that was uncertainty. Nothing in Paul's demeanor had ever prompted fear. In fact, to me, he seemed almost Christ-like in response to adversity. But I had known him only a short time.

I thought about Paul that day and the next as I went about my life, working, going to the gym, watching my pace on the elliptical machine, after dinner with

my younger son. After three uneasy nights during which I plumbed my conscience for what I owed Paul as another human being, I asked my husband if we could agree to have Paul come stay with us until he could find a permanent home. It was the middle of winter—Northern California winter, which isn't Detroit winter, but cold and drizzly and uncomfortable nonetheless. Being the man he is, my husband said yes. At 7:22 the next morning, I sent Paul a text, "Are you OK? You can come stay with us until you find something permanent. Do you want to do that?"

"Dear Sharon! Good morning, good news for me, but I could not do that, my heart & soul happy but my mind say no. You guy gave me a lots. I owed you too much, if can, may you let me borrow your address, let my mails & document come to there. I'm ok! From bottom my heart, I remember what you guys helping me. Paul."

I felt abashed at his gratitude. I didn't feel that I had given him "too much." A little empathy. A little time. It had taken me three days to offer him shelter. Not too heroic. I gave him my address and assured him that the invitation remained open. Several hours later, he texted me a name and a telephone number for a fellow with a local government housing department and asked that I call on his behalf, which I did. He reassured me again that he was "ok." I found a document online with the names and contact information for government housing and emailed it to him. He told me later that he had contacted some of them already.

“Everything should be pass over with new days come,” he wrote. “I alway
hopely no hopless. Paul.”

I texted again two weeks later on the day before Thanksgiving. “How are you?
Have you found a place to live? Can I help you? Do you have a place for
Thanksgiving?”

“Morning Sharon! I’m just thinking of you and then I have got your text. I’m
fine, although have some difficult, but I think shall be overpass. I have no where
to go, I had Spanish class tonight at 6:00pm. Say hello to everyones your family.
God bless your family. I’m miss, always. Paul.

“Would you like to spend Thanksgiving with us? I can send Jesus and my son
to get you. Jesus says to please come. You will make our day.”

“Oh. Sharon! My eyes is fogging, I’m owed you guys too much.”

But he didn’t come.

A week later, he told me that he had “enrolled” with Uber and Lyft to be a driver,
and the day after that, he wrote excitedly in the mid-afternoon that he’d already
had “04” rides that day. And then the next time I saw him, he was driving a Rav 4
hybrid, for which he told me he paid \$600 a month and which he used to take
rides. When I asked him where he was living, I understood that he was sleeping
on a couch in a friend’s office, but I wasn’t sure.

He quickly soured on Uber. “Bah,” he said. “Uber no good.” Uber didn’t charge for extra passengers. “They say it’s one trip,” he said, holding up an arthritic forefinger. “The donkey can only carry so much,” and we laughed.

He drove when he couldn’t work construction. His mustache and soul patch were freshly dyed, and he wore a white baseball cap backwards on his head. Today he’d carried a woman doctor from SFO to Stanford. She’d asked him why Trump had gotten elected a few weeks earlier. He explained to her that it was Hillary Clinton’s history with infidelity in her own marriage and her fatal mistake in campaigning about women who accused Trump of the same offense.

What do you think about Trump’s election, I asked him.

He didn’t like Trump’s constant confrontation and inability to turn the other cheek, he said. The rest of his answer surprised me at first, but upon reflection I realized it was entirely consistent with Paul’s perspective. American politics started with the clarifying lens of Vietnam and the enduring mission to overthrow the government. He was willing to wait to see Trump’s policies. Obama, he believed, had done well at home but had been a foreign policy disaster. He wanted a President Trump to stand up to the Chinese and to get them out of Vietnam. With the right signal from a President Trump, the Vietnamese people would revolt, he said. They just needed the right signal, he repeated, his voice serious, and I had the fleeting thought that he spoke from direct knowledge of rebels within the country.

Time passed. Over lunch one day he told me of his latest money-making idea to make banners with the red and white stripes of the American flag and in the upper left-hand corner, five circles demarcated with ten stars each. Families could put pictures of the mom, dad and three kids, one each in the middle of each circle. You'd make the banners special by putting sequins on them or glitter, he said, but he didn't use the words *glitter* or *sequin* and said they were not what he meant when I supplied them.

You know how when you approach a crosswalk and the things on the road blink back at you? he said. That's what I mean.

His other idea was that my husband run for San José City Council. Between my husband, me, and him, Paul, we'd have the district locked up, he told me.

"But we don't live in San José," I told him.

You could move, he replied. "You only need six months," he said, apparently referencing the residency requirement. I laughed.

"Why would we want to do that?" I asked, genuinely puzzled at how he perceived the benefits.

"You have a lot of power, a lot of power," he said.

My skepticism rose, but I tried not to let on. "What do you want to do with all of that power?" I said, holding my breath.

"Help people," he said.

I should have known.

His second idea, which he demarcated on a piece of white typing paper with an encircled numeral 2, was “Boiling Crabs,” which elicited a guffaw from me. But he was quite serious (and probably right). He explained to me that there were two restaurants that had opened in the city’s southeast quadrant and that the lines on weekends and at lunch were out the door and down the block. It wasn’t for Vietnamese people, he said, it was for young people of every ethnic group. He wanted to show me the places, so we hopped in his SUV to ride over there. It was the first time I had gotten into a car with him, and I hesitated for a second. In the car, he revisited the idea of selling the banners, saying that families who don’t have five people could use a picture of the family dog to fill the circles.

“Americans do love their dogs,” I said.

The Vietnamese in America do, too, he said, even though as far as he was concerned, it was all a big put-on. Back in Vietnam, most of them ate dogs. Now they owned them and treated them as Americans did. They thought it gave them status, he said, though he didn’t use that word.

He had a dog, too.

“What kind of dog is it?” I asked.

Some kind of chihuahua mix, he said. He had gotten it from the pound.

He’d gone to the shelter to get a dog and had picked this one. When it had run away to his neighbor’s house, he had realized it was his former neighbor’s dog. They had abandoned it, and it had wound up in the San José shelter where

Paul had rescued it. He didn't realize it was his former neighbor's dog when he had adopted it. The dog was old now, he said.

He worked a lot. When the winter brought rainy weather, and he couldn't work construction, he'd drive for fares for hours. I urged him to get out of his car and walk for at least five minutes every hour. He told me that he did. At one point, he went to Southern California. He broke a tooth during this time, the incisor immediately in front of his right eyetooth. He said it happened when he was working construction and a tool hit him hard in the mouth. Since then, he's lost several more teeth next to it.

When I met him, he was sixty one years old. He's now sixty four or sixty five. I'd guess he was about five feet four inches and weighed about 140 pounds last time I saw him. The pandemic has kept us apart for nearly a year. He works construction, and I mostly stay at home with my husband. We connect by text. He's living in an apartment in San Jose. Recently, he sent me photos he'd taken where he was working on a so-called "subfloor," work that meant lying on his back for hours beneath a building's floor doing work in what is essentially a cave. The clearance was too low for him to sit.

"Sometimes I think I'll collapse," he texted.

He found my offer to help him find another job patronizing, however, and sent me a text saying, "I can take care of myself."

“I’m sorry!” I said. But then I didn’t know what else to do. Happy emojis are not going to cut it. Not much later he told me he’d lost twenty five pounds “‘cause working too much, but fine & feeling good.”

“25 pounds! That’s too much!” I texted back, alarmed. “You take care of you!”

“My dear! Thank you so much. I take care myself good, healthy & not be sick. You do so, ok! Paul.”

I arranged for him to go to see my dentist to try to get his teeth fixed and had Amazon deliver a book called “Architecture: A Visual History” to his apartment, thinking that if he liked making his home beautiful, he might enjoy looking at the world’s most beautiful houses and buildings. A few days later, I got this text, punctuated with emojis featuring praying hands, looking eyeballs, two yellow smiley faces, and one brown box with a tiny strip of strapping tape and an even tinier address panel: “My dear! Thanks thanks. ... I’m very happy, & take a look inside the book. I like & enjoy it, you know I come back home & see the box, no eat, take shower and jump into bed with book, look look look some words. Paul.”

I’m not sure I can express how happy it made me to read his words.

The only message that made as happy was the one a few days later telling me he’d already visited the dentist.

He asked for the numerals reflecting my birth date. He wanted to use them for what he was convinced would be a winning lottery ticket.

“I hope so,” I texted back, with the numbers. He promised to give me “my share,” which I, of course, would give right back to him. I don’t believe in gambling. But the universe, it seemed to me, owed Paul some luck.

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A Spaniard in Silicon Valley

My Silicon Valley home immobilizes me—my cat, my dog, my rabbit, my garden, my mortgage and my ridiculous property taxes. How did it happen that a home that I’ve loved—a home that my husband and I have lavished attention and money on, an “oasis” in the words of a real estate appraiser—how was it that it now felt as though it were suffocating me?

Perhaps it was that I had just returned from Málaga.

It did not surprise me when I learned that Pablo Picasso was born in Málaga. Only the emotionally inert could remain unmoved. The first day there, we’d walked the shore of the Mediterranean Sea. The sand was dark and grainy, the water smooth, intensely blue and warm. A trim man had emerged from the lapping waves, wiping his face with his left hand.

How is it, my husband had asked in Spanish.

Wonderful, the man had replied.

The man swam the same waters as the Phoenicians nearly thirty centuries ago. We walked the same beach as had first-century Romans, eighth-century Syrians, and thirteenth-century Berbers. Above us, atop a rock promontory like a crouching cat, lay the Castillo de Gibralfaro, the eleventh century walled city and citadel of the Muslim Arab and African kings who’d repelled Christian attack for eight centuries in a vain attempt to hold the Iberian Peninsula.

I’d lived in Madrid for six months when I was twenty. I might have stayed forever had my parents not called me home. I’d never stopped wanting to return,

not to vacation but to stay, at least for awhile. When I was twenty, I hadn't visited Málaga. I knew that on this trip I wanted to go. I was scouting for a place where I hoped we could eventually return to live, for a month, six months, a year.

Málaga is one of the planet's oldest cities. Its marble-paved passageways through plazas and around buildings, past shady city parks and classical city ruins enthralled me far more than any internet app ever could. For all we tell ourselves that the new world is virtual and limitless, the old world here in Málaga, a.k.a. the material world where we all really live, reminds me that the real pre-empts the synthetic—trounces it, really—and always will. Will the internet even exist in three thousand years? I can hear the venture capitalists sputtering—but, will it?

In Silicon Valley we are consumed with the new and the virtual. We have limited public appetite to know, much less to preserve, our natural and social histories. I detect no laid-back California vibe in Silicon Valley. Most people pre- and post-pandemic are scrambling to pay their bills and to find time to express love for their families. Yes, some people grow spectacularly rich. But with the exception of San José State and a few other examples—on the SJSU campus and elsewhere—our major public institutions and public monuments such as our art museums, city parks, festivals, and public statuary are not plentiful and not made extraordinary, either by placement or treatment.

Worldwide, the name Silicon Valley evokes the idea of industrial high technology like no other. But the name conjures no image of our place or

physical location, no natural environment or urban character, no past. No Silicon Valley city bears a public identity that springs from collective community love. No “Keep Santa Cruz Weird” persona. No Big Apple for the Valley of the Prune. Indeed, for all but the richest few, life in Silicon Valley is crushingly expensive and hard. We pay steeply with money and time for the chance to strike gold in the sunshine. Whatever tie people have to this land is stunted, like tree roots in barren soil. Silicon Valley has been made an unwelcoming landscape, a landscape to be exploited by people on their way to someplace else—someplace less expensive, less congested, less used.

And yet, Silicon Valley’s natural landscapes and topography are beautiful and singular. Dedicated citizens have done well in preserving and opening to the public hundreds of thousands of acres, including quintessential California foothills and mountains, oak forests and bay marshes. A large, if sometimes hidden, network of bike trails circles the Bay. Before the pandemic, near Google’s massive complex in Mountain View, workers had begun using this system rather than face commuter roadways.

But people have treated and continue to treat Silicon Valley as a waste pit, and the land, people, and wildlife suffer greatly. Near Google’s rising geodesic dome campus on the sometimes smelly San Francisco Bay marshland, snowy white egrets with their long black legs straight behind fly above Stevens Creek. Below the birds near the Bay, the stream often clogs behind a medley of white

styrofoam drink coolers, aluminum cans, product packaging, and other paper and plastic bits. On our freeways, traffic abates but never disappears.

As we rode the train from Madrid to Jaén to Granada and then the bus to Málaga, it was easy to remember why Spain felt like home. Beneath scuttling clouds and their passing shadows and the brilliant light of the Mediterranean sun, the olive groves and mountain valleys cast romantic spells. With a foretaste of the arid and mountainous Mexican and American West and Southwest, the land was deeply familiar. The fuchsia flowers of the oleanders and the distinct hot orange of the pomegranate blooms—I knew them as I know my name. Both oleander and pomegranate are Mediterranean natives, and both are prolific in the American West.

The vistas filled my mind with nostalgia, not for a life I've ever known but for a life that felt part of something much, much bigger. The Arab Muslims brought their cultivated gardens to Spain twelve hundred years ago. Their fruits were all around me. An olive tree can live two thousand years. Where were my olive gardens? Where were Silicon Valley's?

Landscapes transform the material world into “lived cultural environments,” Ian Straughn writes in *Materializing Islam*. “(W)ithin the Islamic tradition ... (landscape) is not simply about making the material world social, but about making that social world spiritual.” (I)n the Qur’ān ... the natural world is a locus of the divine ... ” (12).

Vine imagery is a “synecdoche for, and synonymous with, Paradise itself” (92).

In Arabic, Straughn says, *karma* is the “sculpted vine used as decoration in the prayer hall of the Great Mosque of Damascus” (378).

For the Muslim Arabs of medieval Spain, place, spiritual harmony, and good daily living were one and the same. They could only be achieved simultaneously. They created place within space, say, a house within a walled and irrigated garden or a palace within a walled city, to promote calm and a moment by moment manner of life. That manner, premised on personal safety, enhanced the contemplation of one’s spirituality and promoted actions that comported with those beliefs. It is no wonder that in the Muslim Arab world of medieval Spain, the garden assumed stature as an elevated place—paradise, no less—where achieving this set of lofty goals is possible.

Today, Silicon Valley’s electronic devices enthrall Spaniards as much as they enthrall Americans. In Madrid, my husband snapped a photo from our balcony of a well-dressed Spanish señora walking in the city’s annual St. Isidro parade. She’d paused for a selfie, no doubt to post on Facebook. A few paces away, priests carried a giant gold cross and renderings of the saint. At Madrid’s Atocha train station, the waiting room was filled with people, heads bowed, scrolling on phones. No one spoke. On the bus from Granada to Málaga, I eaves-read a text

conversation that a lady in front of me was having with a loved one who'd been hospitalized. Her phone didn't auto-correct her Spanish.

Americans see the year 1492 and recall Christopher Columbus and his fatal journeys to the New World under the patronage of Spain's King Ferdinand and Queen Isabela. But by the time the calendar reached 1492, Columbus had for years tried to persuade the king and queen to finance his voyage. What changed the sovereign minds? In January 1492, they finally had succeeded in their reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula, expelling the last Muslim king from Al-Andalus.

It was this aggressively Christian Spain that destroyed and sought to extinguish the Islamic influence on Iberian culture and architecture, even as it built upon both. It was this aggressively Christian Spain that became the cultural export to the New World including places Americans now label California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas—the places that I've lived all my life. And though the most prominent Spanish export, most brand-related if you will, is Catholicism, Spain's Islamic heritage survives, not least in the cultivated garden with fragrant and bountiful fruit trees and food crops alongside decorative flowers; a garden for pleasure and purpose, encircled and protected from the sun and harsh elements by stucco walls and interior courtyards with tinkling water fountains and careful irrigation.

I started learning Spanish in the fifth grade when my family moved to Tucson, Arizona. At Fort Lowell Elementary School, every week for an hour, I would hover over a cassette player at a cafeteria table, repeating after a man speaking Castilian in a trilly baritone. Improbable as it seems, from there came an undergraduate major in Spanish literature and a decade of news reporting on the U.S.-Mexico border before coming to Silicon Valley in 2000 as the dot-com frenzy reached chaos.

My husband and I were struck right away by the difference in local attitudes toward the region's Spanish-Mexican heritage compared to what we'd lived. On the border biculturalism was transparent. Locals slipped seamlessly from Spanish to English and back again. Families lived in Laredo and had their business across the U.S.-Mexico border in Nuevo Laredo.

Dozens of Bay Area cities and landmarks have names that are Spanish—San José, San Francisco, Santa Clara, Los Gatos, Santa Cruz, Monte Sereno, Los Altos, Palo Alto, Milpitas, San Mateo, San Carlos, San Bruno, Alameda, San Pablo, Vallejo, Pescadero, Los Banos, El Cerrito, San Leandro, Pacifica, Linda Mar, El Granada, Miramar, Salinas, San Juan Bautista, and the list could continue. But English-language television and radio announcers don't even attempt to pronounce these names as they would be said in Spanish. The Bay Area's largest city by far, San José, is also California's oldest, established by the Spaniards in 1777. Yet the city wavers between San Jose and San José. San José State, California's first public university and the largest and most significant

public institution in the city and region, has vacillated but has finally adopted the accented “e.” The city of San Jose, the self-identified “Capital of Silicon Valley,” has not.

San José’s uncertain relationship with its name expresses a long-standing civic discomfort with who Silicon Valley has been and has been becoming —racially, ethnically and socioeconomically. In 1980, more than seventy percent of Valley residents were non-Hispanic whites. Today, Asian, white, and Hispanic peoples each represent roughly a third of the population, and Blacks represent about three percent. In the two decades to come, the Asian population is projected to grow and the other racial groups to continue to shrink, according to demographers working for the city of San José. Sixty seven percent of all tax-exempt affordable housing in Santa Clara County is in San José, which has only half of the county’s population and only thirty eight percent of the county’s total taxable property value, according to the county assessor.

Nationally, the Bay Area operates in the popular political imagination as a poster child for the most progressive flank of the political left-wing. But anyone who reads our local daily newspaper, the proud *Mercury News*, or looks at voter registration data, or knows a bit about Silicon Valley’s commercial history and the deep and longstanding ties between the Valley’s economic interests and the U.S. Department of Defense glimpses the conservatism that runs like a blade of Toledo steel through local culture. Silicon Valley swung more toward Donald Trump in the 2020 election compared to 2016 than all but a handful of other U.S.

metros, according to *The New York Times*. Silicon Valley is not San Francisco—historically, physically, politically—as much as the nation seems to conflate the two.

There is no doubt why the Valley's huge Hispanic population—483,000 people in Santa Clara County, according to the Census Bureau—is mostly ignored and taken for granted: very few Hispanics work in high tech. Over the seven years that ended in June 2020, for instance, Facebook reported that the portion of its U.S. employees who were Hispanic had risen from four percent to 6.3 percent. But nearly all of that growth sprang from increases in non-technical employment, not in additions to leadership positions or to the technically skilled workforce, where the proportions of Hispanics were virtually unchanged. And yet, the continuing and residual impact of Spanish conquest and civilization on Silicon Valley—most obviously expressed through the Catholic Church—remains profound.

Spain and the Spanish Catholic Church are the original Silicon Valley founders and investors, asserting their claims over competitors's claims from Russia, England, and France. Mission Santa Clara spawned Santa Clara University and Bellarmine College Preparatory, still the Valley's most prestigious all-boys high school, offering, like the university, a Jesuit education. Bellarmine grants need-based scholarships to every student admitted.

From there has come a network of Catholic elementary and middle schools, which feed students not only to Bellarmine, but to other Catholic high schools like

the co-ed Archbishop Mitty and Presentation, an all-girls high school. The Sobrato family, led by billionaire patriarch John A. Sobrato, who attended Bellarmine and Santa Clara University and made his fortune in Silicon Valley real estate, has given hundreds of millions of dollars to the community. The Sobrato Organization has entered into a long-term and profound redevelopment arrangement with the Catholic Church in downtown Mountain View near the Google headquarters. At the urging of Warren Buffett, John A. Sobrato, his wife and son, John M. Sobrato, have agreed to leave all of their vast wealth to The Sobrato Family Foundation “to invest in organizations that improve the lives of the less fortunate in the greater Silicon Valley community and to institutions like Santa Clara University, which have helped make the Sobrato Organization the success that it is,” John A. Sobrato said in a 2017 statement to announce a \$100 million gift to the university, the largest in its and the Sobrato family’s history.

In the mid-1950s a Catholic priest helped awaken the political, social, and religious awareness of one Cesar Chavez, then living in East San José’s Sal Si Puedes neighborhood. In Spanish, *sal si puedes* means *leave if you can*.

Historians regard Chavez, a farmworker himself, as one of the most important twentieth century civil and labor rights leaders. His actions helped highlight the injustices wrought for migrant Mexican American and Mexican farmworkers as a result of the exploitive U.S. *bracero* system. It allowed Mexican laborers to work for large growers in the United States under temporary contracts while living in

camps. The additional labor supply flooded local labor markets, undercutting domestic and foreign workers' wages.

A young man with little formal education when he began under the tutelage of Father Donald McDonnell, Chavez learned the activist, social-justice doctrine of the Catholic Church and the community organizing ideas that underpinned his leadership. Integral to this process was Our Lady of Guadalupe Mission Chapel, which Chavez and his family helped to restore in the early 1950s, according to its National Historic Landmark nomination.

The chapel responded to a long-held desire from the largely Spanish-speaking East San José community for its own parish church. Though it didn't fulfill that goal technically, Our Lady of Guadalupe chapel served the same purpose, supplying a place not only for worship but also for community organizing including ambitious voter registration drives. This humble building facilitated and symbolizes the struggle of Mexicans and Mexican Americans for social equity and civil and labor rights. It also validated the Mexican American community within the American Catholic Church in a new and evocative way and helped to create and hone the skills that East San José leaders needed to evolve change. That all of these activities coalesced in the same humble building, all aiming to elevate the same people in different ways, affected Chavez deeply in the early formative years of his career.

A photo of the chapel interior after Chavez and his family did their work is included in the Historic Landmark nomination. The image shows the nave from

the perspective of the chapel's front door. The wooden floor is scuffed, and the pews are not new, but the arched ceiling, crafted wooden wainscoting, peaked wooden window frames, and life-sized images and statuary of Jesús and La Virgin convey deep religious faith.

I've traveled to the site, imagining that I'd find a jewel box of a museum, lovingly restored, with a little gift shop of inspiring memorabilia. I'd fleetingly wondered why I'd never heard of it before. These were the fantastic thoughts of a naive, overly optimistic woman. When I'd arrived I'd found a locked, dirty, and deconsecrated building in the middle of a large asphalt parking lot where people lived in cardboard boxes behind a metal trucking crate. While I'd stood reading the historic marker in front, a metallic crunch caught my ear. I'd turned to see a hairy male arm extended from the driver's side window of a white compact car. The arm's hand was crushing a Budweiser beer can, which it launched in a smooth arch over the car's roof and hood onto the ground beyond the front bumper. The driver ignited the engine, backed and sped away, spewing gravel. I'd been stunned. I'd driven around the corner to see the clapboard house where Chavez and his family had lived for the same six years. It was a moldering heap of cracked wooden siding and peeling paint.

The Sal Si Puedes neighborhood has certainly improved since Chavez lived there, first with his parents and siblings on and off beginning in 1939 and then as a young father and husband from 1952 to 1958. Today, the roads are paved, and people no longer rely on outhouses. But the neighborhood retains the crowded,

chaotic feel that Chavez himself described. Small homes crowd small lots that front narrow streets on which too many cars compete for too little parking. Hardscape dominates. My mind imagined how a beautifully restored chapel and Chavez family home might affect the daily thoughts and existence of the people of Sal Si Puedes. I for one can attest to an overwhelming sense of inspiration from what I've learned about Chavez and his life. How much more alive his ideas and achievements, their genesis and their repercussions, could become if we could walk the same half-mile from a restored Chavez family home to a restored chapel, passing beneath what could easily be the same California willow or sycamore near the same Silver Creek, degraded as it is.

There, in front of the Chavez home, the shiny new headquarters of the Silicon Valley tech companies might as well be on the moon, so far do they feel in mind, spirit, time, and place. I don't know why a fraction of the billions of dollars spent to build our corporate mansions never flows south to the Chavez home and chapel, to Sal Si Puedes, where the investment return in human capital would be incalculable.

In Málaga that first late afternoon, we walked a wide black-and-white checkered promenade between the beach and the boulevard back to the hotel. Hundreds of tourists and Spaniards with their dogs—German shepherds, English bulldogs, Yorkshire terriers, an international panoply—chatted and strolled all around. We heard green parrots or maybe parakeets squawking from the tops of the palm

trees that lined the walkway. We stopped to examine the stiff green fans of one tree. Another couple about our age with their dogs also stopped and searched the palms—the birds were new to them too. The bird chatter was impossible to ignore, but the birds themselves melted like mist into the yellow foliage that crowded the spaces between the fronds. I thought about a flock of green Andean parakeets—lost pets, escaped captives—that live in the mock cherry trees of a parking lot at home in Silicon Valley and other Southern California flocks that I’ve seen in recent years. These Malagueñian birds were transplants too. We are all international migrants, or children or grandchildren of such travelers, and have been since the dawn of humanity.

It was after eight, and the sun was barely setting. Like at home, it wouldn’t be dark for another hour or more. The tables and chairs of the seaside cafes filled with people. Ladies gathered sheer shawls against the cooling breeze. We passed two wood-fired grills beneath corrugated steel sheeting set on four wooden posts on the beach. A grill-master had mounted a whole fish nose down on a metal spike above the embers. The heat radiated across the sand and sea wall.

A lady in short black shorts and a black bandeau top rollerbladed past wearing earbuds and carrying her iPhone. Her chest slightly forward, she pushed her long tan legs out languorously behind her. Her slender arms pulled rhythmically forward to back—left, right, left, right. She was an immortal goddess in an immortal scene.

Near the hotel I saw small red banners mounted to the light-posts. Each banner bore the reproduction of a painting of a woman, a blonde with bare arms and bare legs and bleached hair above dark brows and hazel eyes.

“‘Perversidad: Mujeres Fatales en el Arte Moderno,’ Museo Carmen Thyssen Málaga,” the banners said.

“I want to see that,” I said.

Viewed on Google Earth, the Iberian Peninsula looks boldly out to sea. The green of trees and other flora begins thick and brilliant near the Atlantic coast then diminishes like an expiring breeze as the moisture travels across the land into green valleys that weave and wave like ocean kelp amid the brown. The famous Iberian profile personifies the Iberian experience—the sweeping forehead, the pointed nose, and the lips curling around the mouth of the Tagus River, stupendous home of Lisbon. From miles above, the Spanish land conveys an essence of life experienced there, the harsh open country and central plains against plush mountain valleys and cultivated tracts; the hot and the cold, the shade and the sun together all one, with the clouds hung above, moving north, up from the sea.

On the second morning, we walked to the hill where the Castillo de Gibralfaro stretched. Workers were reconstructing a first century, marble Roman amphitheater at the hill’s base. The Berber kings built their castle atop this

Roman foundation. The roadway up was luxuriously paved with marble, but slick. Our guide at the Alhambra, Sophia, told us that slippery stones were set in the castles' entryways to stymie the swift passage of horse and man. As we climbed, several people sat heavily along the roadside, overcome by the heat and exertion. The few trees cast little shade.

From the ramparts of the citadel, all of Málaga, its coast and the sea stretched below. East and west, the shore formed an endless cascade of scallops and quays. Yesterday's boulevard hugged its beloved beach tight. Old and new, white stucco with red tile, cast concrete and wood—buildings, buildings everywhere climbed the hills up from the sea, painted peach and canary yellow and green. Mid-rise apartments and condominium blocks and the occasional two-story mansion vied for a glimpse of the saturated blue. The perfectly round bullring, empty and sterile now. To the west, the hazy profile of a small mountain range culminated in a rocky peninsula bristling with buildings and trees.

On a map, the Mediterranean is dwarfed by the Atlantic Ocean, the Pacific, indeed all of the oceans of the world. In real life, from above, the inscrutable water lay like a huge sheet of navy-blue plate glass so vast it seemed to curve at its distant limits around the arc of the earth. With its almost unbearable uniformity and the sheer span of its horizon—well more than one-hundred-eighty degrees—the water lay never-ending.

To understand Spain—and Spanish impact on the New World—is to understand that, for more than seven hundred and fifty years, Iberian people

looked east and south for cultural orientation, to their Levantine and African neighbors, to Arab and Islamic influence. Scholars consider Spain at the end of the first millennia a cultural unit not with Europe but with the Maghreb, and an exporter of the traditional craftspeople who helped to create the early Islamic art and architecture of North Africa.

Southern Spain feels like one vast garden, mountain range upon mountain range separated by wide curving valleys, characterized by an overall ashy green, the largest concentration of olive groves in the history of the planet. The olive and Andalusian groves are so enmeshed with historic national identity, Spain seeks to declare them World Heritage sites. In a world besotted and bewildered by corporate power, greed, and corruption, Spain's groves are largely owned by small independent farmers.

From horizon to horizon across Andalusia, thousands upon thousands of acres of olive trees are laid out in neat parallel lines across hills and down valleys, a never-ending patchwork according to the contours of the land and the judgment of the farmer. Groves climb the mountainsides until the slope becomes too steep, or the soil gives way entirely to rock escarpment with a pine forest on top. Where nature prevails in open terrain, oak trees thrive, especially nestled within the bosom of a valley. Here, cattle and sheep often graze.

Every urban *café* and *restaurante* serves fresh olive oil and the most beautiful olives, light-green and spongy, not brown and saturated with brine like the turds that pass for olives from a jar. It is the ubiquitous olive's tie to the land and to the

city, to everyday eating and to popular life, that symbolizes and actualizes the Spanish character. It is the same feet-firm-in-the-soil reality that Sancho Panza brings to Don Quixote. Life must be lived some place, one moment at a time. There is no other way.

Building on the Roman and Visigoth traces in Iberia, the Arabs transformed the peninsula's cultivated garden and agricultural economy. Two centuries after their arrival, with the fall of the original Damascene caliphate, the peninsula broke into a network of kingdoms. Regional governors declared themselves kings with independent courts. Regional arts rose and blossomed.

The word for "garden" also evolved regionally, says *The Grove Encyclopedia of Islamic Art and Architecture*. In Córdoba, it was *munya* (object of desire). In Almería, it was the *burj*. In Granada, in the hills of the Albaicin, the Muslim quarter adjacent to The Alhambra where my husband and I climbed the first day we arrived in Granada, the word for garden is *carmen*, and dozens of homes and places retain the name even today. *Carmen* originates from the Arab word *karma*, the word for vine, "the only productive plant whose culture was economically feasible" in the dry Mediterranean land, the encyclopedia says. The repeating pattern of the arabesque imitates the *karma* and the endless repetition of existence. The *Bhagavad Gita* tells us, "*Karma* is the force of creation, wherefrom all things have their life."

Our *carmen*, the *carmen* of my husband and me, the *Carmen de Nava y Simonson*, incorporates all of the features of the Hispano-Iberian *carmen*—the fruit tree, the herb, the decorative flower—in that mix of the practical and the sheerly beautiful that seems to repeat in the patterns of all life in Al-Andalus. This combination is nothing that my husband and I have planned, just a spontaneous “discursive” human expression, as the archeologists like to say, of our lives and the land we both have occupied and the places we have been.

For the Islamic Arabs and Berbers in Spain, place was soul, place was life. If I were to apply that philosophy to Silicon Valley, our souls are troubled indeed. Our public policies, corporations, and lifestyles have weakened our bodies, polluted our air, ruined our places, and driven us online to create virtual gardens we could tolerate. They have led to our national cultural disintegration and atomization. Our ill-conceived public gardens—real and virtual—are making us sick, wrought as they are by the corrupt elevation of money-making over quality of life, the collective cultural mantra of America expressed nowhere more succinctly than in Silicon Valley.

When I see the Alhambra at the base of the Sierra Nevada, still snow-capped in the final days of May, the brilliance of the kings of Al-Andalus shines, not only their military brilliance, but their brilliance for combining the purely practical with the aesthetically pleasing. It’s hard to conceive a more impregnable location than the Alhambra’s. It’s hard to conceive a more Edenic one. The same is true of

their *castillos* in Málaga and Jaén. Steve Jobs, a man who understood the power of design to elevate and to beautify, would approve.

My mother loved gardens. She herself didn't put her hands in dirt. That would have ruined her nails. But she and Gilbert Granillo, a man who understood the *carmens* of Southern Arizona better than most, conceived and created beautiful gardens together for our Tucson homes, first for the small desert adobe where we lived on West Miramar Drive and then for our territorial-style adobe brick home on East Miramar. When Gilbert built the rose beds, he dug a rectangular hole three-feet wide by five feet long and deep enough in the Arizona sand for him to stand up to his hips. He filled it with organic soil. He knew that is what had to be done to make the roses thrive—and they did. A Cecile Brunner rose bush that he planted grew to cover an entire wall of our house with delicate pink miniature roses. On the pillars he trained pinwheel jasmine and purple clematis.

On the side of the house on West Miramar, a huge pomegranate tree thrived. In the summer I peeled back the leathery skin of its fruit and then the yellow membrane that protected the dozens of shiny red beads inside, sweet raindrops. *Granada* means pomegranate in Spanish, and grenadine is made from pomegranates's juice. In the desert, where it is so dry, it is worth the trouble to peel to find the perfectly formed embedded seeds. Some of my strongest memories of life at age twelve or thirteen are Gilbert's gardens, the pomegranate, and the huge oleander bushes that surrounded our lot.

My husband digs his hands freely and gleefully in the Silicon Valley soil. From where I sit inside my house, I see the red of the emerging flowers of the giant canna that he has planted along our back fence. In the spring the Cecile Brunner's pink blossoms explode along its long, reaching branches, which arch over the pool and its Mexican tile with ashy green circles outlined in black and connected by black crosshatching. The repeating pattern is simpler but not unlike the repeating contemplative tile patterns of the Alhambra. A huge schefflera plant that we've carted around the nation for thirty years would grow even taller with a bigger pot. The ferns are a decade old, the jade plants nearly two. Two ficus trees, both pot-bound, are nearly twenty. My husband's garden that I have been lucky enough to share and to help care for, is a mobile garden that for a moment had seemed permanent after we'd lived in this place for so long.

A hummingbird built her nest in our Silicon Valley garden the summer after we returned from Spain. A friend, a native of Mexico, was awed when she saw the bird's tiny, brown, woven nest. In Mexico, she explained, a hummingbird signifies not only a place that has good luck, but also one that bestows it.

After my husband built a vegetable garden on the side of the house, each of our yards—front, back and both sides—began to attain place. The rabbit in his hutch overlooked a lovely new vegetable patch where his lettuce grew. The frilly green leaves disappeared into his mouth. His dark brown eyes closed slightly, his black ears lay back. No garden is complete without a rabbit. During the late summer solitude of the pandemic, I dug out a flower-drying kit that I bought for

my husband a million years ago and began to dry some of our flowers from the garden. We were both impressed.

“You can make notecards and send our pressed flowers to people,” my husband said that afternoon as he watched me. “You can tell them they are from the *Carmen de los Conejos*.”

My mother called my brother and me Bunny Rabbit when we were children. I call my children and my husband Bunny Rabbit, too. A bronze bunny head above the threshold of our front door watches over our *carmen*.

Our places determine how we experience every moment of every day of every life. We create our landscapes, but our landscapes also create us. I can only speculate about the civilization that is rising from the Silicon Valley landscapes we have built. At least we still have our natural landscapes, for now.

It is the romantic element of Islamo-Spanish culture that worries me most. Fantasy blurs the line between the real world and the world that one wishes to be. I take solace in knowing that people much, much smarter than I have noted and remarked on the Spanish proclivity for romanticism—that is, the proclivity for others to romanticize the Spanish and Spain, especially Andalusia.

The thing is, Spanish history is romantic and fantastic. Sometime early in the eighth century, the caliphate in Damascus sent explorers west across the Mediterranean Sea. Nearly four thousand miles later, they arrived to the place we now know as the Iberian Peninsula. Within seven years, all but a narrow segment

at the northern extreme of the peninsula, against the Pyrenees Mountains, had fallen under the caliphate's dominion. Then, less than a hundred years later, the Damascus caliphate fell. Only a single member of the extended royal family, 'Abd al-Rahmān ibn Mu'āwiya, eventually known as al-Dākhil, "the Incomer," escaped murder at the usurpers' hands. He fled to the Iberian Peninsula, and there, established his kingdom, now a vestige of a former empire.

According to *Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain*, for the next seven hundred years, the Arab and Berber Muslims created an agriculturally advanced and architecturally and aesthetically rich civilization. But they lived under constant attack from zealous Christian kings and queens, eager to retake the rich territory. In response, the Arab and Berber kings built walled cities and an elaborate network of watchtowers. They sent messages in hours from one end of the country to the other using fire at night and smoke signals during the day. For the Muslims it was a story of constant loss, culminating in a final great expulsion.

In our room at the Hotel Mariposa, my husband had asked me what I'd wanted to do on that, our last day in Málaga. For several days he'd said he wanted to eat lunch or dinner at a restaurant atop a neighboring hotel. He wanted to photograph the sweeping coastline and a giant Ferris wheel being constructed in the plaza below.

"What about the photos at the restaurant on top of the building," I asked.

“No,” he said, surprising me, he’d abandoned that idea. Even from the wide plaza where the old stone building sat with the terrace bar perched enticingly above, he could see the pretension. It wasn’t for him.

What did I want to do, he persisted, on this, our next-to-last day in Spain?

“I want to go see those perverse femmes fatales over at the Museo Carmen Thyssen,” I said.

“Then let’s go,” he said.

So we went, wandering a bit through the maze of marble-paved alleyways, past restaurants and shops cooled by the giant shadow of the Catedral de la Encarnación de Málaga.

The Carmen Thyssen itself is a wondrous work of art. The white marble in the renovated and reconstructed Renaissance palace almost glows. A central courtyard is surrounded on both floors by wide, open air hallways demarcated by matching columns. During reconstruction in 2011, workers found a third century Roman nymphaeum—a shrine to nymphs, including wall paintings—far below the surface. The Greeks and Romans believed nymphs were supernatural women and associated them with natural places and landforms and elements such as the wind and sunset.

The permanent exhibits on the museum’s lower floors were all beige walls, cultured pearls and white linen. On the fourth floor, revolution had broken out, and the battle was bloody. The gallery walls were painted red, and the competing identities of Western womanhood as the nineteenth century ended and the

twentieth began were at blows. Gone were the blissful Mary and baby Jesus and the Romantic era's modest Andalusian maids. These fourth-floor perverse women were dismantling the Western patriarchy and its sweaty grip on feminine behavior, and they were doing it absolutely beautifully.

I say thank you, ladies, for helping me to find my way here in the year 2019, for helping the billions of women who have lived in the last one hundred years. Thank you blue-eyed beauty in Ignacio Zuloaga's 1922 *Desnudo Rojo* for exuding joy in life, naked on your red velvet couch. Thank you angel in Kees van Dongen's *El Tango del Arcángel* for dancing demurely and nude in your hose and red and green pumps. Thank you to Eve in Federico Beltrán Masses' 1929 *La Noche de Eva*. You are a transforming Eve, an Eve in a definite process of losing one worldview and gaining another. We, your grateful successors, march on. Here in Silicon Valley the battle feels close. The most prolific wealth-spinning machine ever created by humankind, also known as the information technology industry, still overwhelmingly benefits white and Asian men at the expense of the planet and everyone else. Indeed, so many more men than women work in tech that it flips the gender ratio of the regional population. In Silicon Valley, there are nearly one hundred three men for every one hundred women; nationally there are one hundred women for every ninety-seven men.

I woke before dawn the day after we returned home to Silicon Valley. My mind saw not the celery-green walls of my bedroom but the smooth cream-colored

marble of Jaén's Arab baths. *I can slip into this airy, light-filled marble-cooled room*, my mind told itself. *So simple, so timeless. How lovely.* It was only as I stepped beneath the threshold of our bedroom door that I understood where I really was.

In the coming days, I found myself Googling “apartment rent’ + Málaga” and “yoga + Malaga.” Between unpacking and re-settling, I followed my husband around the house, suggesting that we could go back the next fall and stay for a month. “We could go to all of the other cities in Andalusia,” I said. “I read today about one where there’s another *castillo*, and then there’s Valencia, up the coast, that place where the kid on the plane said he’d been. Remember?”

My husband was sweetly enthusiastic. A year can be a long time, he suggested gently.

We laughed.

A week later, I saw a young woman rollerblading in our suburban neighborhood. She looked about thirty-two. She was wearing black leggings, a black bandeau top and headphones. Her tummy and arms were tanned. She pushed forward in front of me as I rode my bicycle to her left then past. I’m pretty sure she was not an immortal goddess in an immortal scene. I saw that one house had a pomegranate bush and then another, their distinct orange blossoms intensely colored against their dark green foliage. I rode past a thick lush hedge of pink, fuchsia and white oleander. My mind jumped to the view from the bus

window entering Málaga, where oleander grew wild in the stream bed that curved around the base of the mountains.

I got an email this morning from Antonio Mateos, the man who owned the rare book shop in Málaga. For a moment I was back on the quiet marble-paved alleyway where my husband had spotted his small sign, then inside his cozy store with dark wooden shelves on three walls, floor to ceiling, full of antique leather- and gilt-bound books. I could see his face and lavender blue eyes, his quiet smile and delight at our delight. He'd been sick, or he would have responded to my note sooner, he wrote.

No matter, man, I thought impatiently. It's just so delightful to hear from you, to read your beautiful Spanish, to be there with you by the sea back in yesterday.

His grandfather, a railroad inspector by trade, had founded his *libreria* in 1938 in the midst of the Spanish Civil War. He couldn't help himself he so loved these books, Antonio had said. Eighty years later, here he, Antonio, had followed his father and grandfather into the trade.

Take good care, I typed in my reply, yours is one of the most important professions in the world. I am counting on seeing you when I return to Málaga, I told myself. I'm planning on a month next October.

Months later pandemic struck. The "next October" of my message has come and gone, and our family is looking at a quiet, sequestered Thanksgiving and Christmas as the virus rages. My dream of a return to Málaga remains intact, nestled safe in the Andalusian *carmens* of my mind.

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