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The Last Orange Grove in Los Angeles

Long before Disneyland broke ground in Orange County, a doctor named Hubert Eaton created Los Angeles' Disneyland of Death—the Forest Lawn Memorial Park chain of cemeteries. The year was 1917, and Eaton had a unique vision: His cemeteries would look like heaven. Forget your powder-puff heaven with St. Peter and pearly gates. Eaton envisioned tree-studded hills, sparkling blue fountains and alabaster statuary overlooking plots named Babyland and Dawn of Tomorrow. Out went crosses, tombstones and gothic reminders of death. In went flat homogenous grave markers, evenly spaced apart. The result is the world's only McHeaven franchise, all devoted to an imaginary state of perfection.

When I was sixteen, the Hollywood Hills Forest Lawn Mortuary was my vision of Nature, not Heaven, albeit a mythic misrepresentation of Nature on par with Disneyland's *faux* Ozarks and animatronic banjo-playing bears. Even now, beyond the pine trees bordering Forest Lawn, sagebrush remains the only trace of Nature growing from the crusty Hollywood Hills. The rest of Los Angeles is a dry basin of asphalt, stucco and cement. Local parks, mere grass patches with sandboxes and slides, are sandwiched between parking lots and traffic-congested streets. Echo Park and Elysian Park each have oil-filmed lakes better suited to body dragging than fishing. Infamous Griffith Park, around the corner from Forest Lawn, stands on 4,218 acres of cursed land inhabited by the homeless as well as the ghost of its former owner, Don Antonio Feliz.

You might say Forest Lawn is the only *safe* green spot of Nature I ever found in Los Angeles. This was twenty years ago, before I moved to the rolling hills of Iowa and later the rustic countryside of Missouri, places where the term Nature still means something.

Thirty years before Forest Lawn broke ground, a different theme-park vision defined Los Angeles. This was the Myth of Plenty that land speculators and railroad barons concocted in the late 1800s: The myth of orange groves and berry farms with fruit bursting on the vine. Citrus and berries did indeed grow in Los Angeles during the 1800s. Nineteenth century city boosters exaggerated this fact by strategically planting grapevines alongside railroads. Promotional brochures for the Santa Fe line claimed travelers would be delivered directly into groves of oranges and lemons. Ad campaigns lured would-be farmers and travelers to L.A. with images of winter fruit harvests. One 1870's ad featured a young couple basking below an orange tree alongside an East Coast image of kids playing in the snow. "You may throw snowballs for me," the caption said, "and I will eat oranges for you." The orange became the symbol of a perfect climate as well as endless opportunities ripe for the plucking. But it was all a Disneyland myth of L.A., more fantasy than fact, a myth I thought long dead until today.

It is a crisp February afternoon in Missouri, not Los Angeles, with salt-grained snow falling outside my campus window, when this bygone propaganda resurfaces, long buried in midwestern root cellars, only to emerge when a student comes to my office to talk about his writing. Because I'm from California, the student tells me that he always wanted to farm oranges in Los Angeles.

This is no ordinary student. Though he's been passing as a generic college senior, he's really a twenty-five-year-old cattle rancher from the Ozarks. You'll find no Country Bear Jamborees in his world, nor buck-toothed men with long beards and banjos; these are constructs, myths, mere ideas of the Ozarks. Unlike someone from Appalachia who might find a term like Hillbilly offensive, this student proudly defines himself as a Hillbilly, a label that speaks to deep community values and culturally enforced humility. "Where I come from, no one tolerates an air of entitlement," he tells me.

He is not only a self-professed Hillbilly but also an expert in entomology, specifically tree-boring insects. For my course in creative nonfiction, he's consistently written the most amazing essays I've ever read, plain-

spoken and wise, essays that attempt to preserve a culture of farm life that merges with a culture of drugs and poverty, that he calls “rough” and “unstable.” This student may well be the next Wendell Berry, but he’s also darker, knowledgeable of Nature as well as Loss. Like Berry, he’s a nature writer with the ability to name every part of the landscape, every variety of grass, every flower and every weed. Reminiscent of the old linguist’s myth about the Eskimo word for *snow*, he seems to have one hundred different words for *topsoil*, another one of his areas of expertise.

After bringing up the orange groves, he casually tells me that he’ll be lecturing at an environmental history conference on the subject of submarginal land. “It’s my third lecture to date,” he says. “I’m a sideshow freak to them. Part of the entertainment.” He pauses briefly, then shakes off his thoughts to return to the topic of orange groves, saying, “I always imagined that a place like Los Angeles would still have groves here and there.”

I smile but can’t bring myself to tell him the truth about Los Angeles. For some people the word *California* conjures that fabulous navy-blue script from turn-of-the-century labels glued to old wooden fruit crates—*California Grapefruit* and *California Strawberries*. Those fruit crates, now buried among the debris in midwestern basements, still hold the tincture of that old Myth of Plenty. Anyone who’s actually grown up in Los Angeles has no such myth in mind. Along the Hollywood freeway and down Wilshire Boulevard, I’ve never seen anything that resembles a fruit grove. The only greenery is in Forest Lawn.

I once explained this dearth of vegetation to a friend from Iowa, the son of bean farmers who lost everything to the 1980’s farm crisis. This friend proudly called himself a Farmer’s Son, though he was also a Business Major and Manager of the men’s department at JCPenney. The term Farmer’s Son was a label he couldn’t leave behind; it held the values of human decency he aspired to in a way the label Business Major never could. I told this Farmer’s Son that in high school I used to drive up the loping hills of Forest Lawn to get out of the concrete world and feel the grass under my feet. My friend leaned close to me after I told him of my misspent youth in a cemetery. “Never tell that story again,” he whispered. “Never! Not in Iowa.” I

thought he was joking but soon realized he wasn't. For a Farmer's Son, there was something grotesque about my story, something approaching the obscene.

The student now sitting in my campus office is also a Farmer's Son, and I suspect he will have a similar reaction, so I don't tell him about Forest Lawn. "Well," the student says in a world-weary voice, "I always dreamed of moving to Los Angeles to farm oranges, but everyone I've known who went there had all their dreams killed."

"Too bad there aren't any more orange groves in Los Angeles," I finally tell him.

He nods, genuinely disappointed by this news, as if reflecting on yet another loss in his life.

Meanwhile, sitting here in front of him, I feel I have gained something tremendous, something long extinct that could only exist in a Literary Disneyland: Somewhere in Frontier Writer Land, alongside a figure of Mark Twain puffing a cigar, exhibit creators will erect a ridiculous animatronic misrepresentation of this student in a rocking chair beside a pot-bellied stove—a book in one hand, a shotgun in the other. His plaque will say, "Here sits the Last Literary Genius in America, a breed of writer now extinct, a casualty of Postmodernism."

This Hillbilly, this Cattle Rancher, this Farmer's Son has already lived a complicated life. He writes about Survival with a capital "S" and about the unfit cattle he's had to slaughter.

"How can there be no orange groves?" he asks me. He is sitting with his ankle crossed over his kneecap; a worn-out cowboy boot juts into the space between us. "There must be *one* orange grove left."

"Maybe one," I say.

While talking to him, I remember an image from Charles Bukowski's Los Angeles memoir *Ham on Rye*: The year is 1927, and the Bukowski family has taken the Model-T out for a drive one Sunday afternoon. This is the long Sunday drive of America, a mythic Sunday drive that takes a wrong turn when Bukowski's father, always ranting about his brother's

easy success, drives around Los Angeles aimlessly for over an hour. He rages at his wife when she asks where they are going. "I'm gonna get me some god-damned oranges," he finally says. Stopping the Model-T outside an orange grove, he hops a fence and yanks oranges from a tree so savagely that the branches leap up and down. Eventually a Farmer comes out and points a shotgun at Bukowski's father.

"All right, buddy," the Farmer says, "what do you think you're doing?"

"I'm picking oranges," Bukowski's father replies. "There are plenty of god-damned oranges. You're not going to miss a few god-damned oranges."

I am not doing Bukowski justice, not capturing his father's American rage, a rage akin to righteous entitlement or some irrational desire to grasp onto that fruit and steal someone else's hard-won success one damn orange at a time. By 1927, the dream of the Los Angeles orange grove was nearing its death. Back in 1889, the real estate bubble had burst; agricultural land soared to \$5000 an acre, and investors were left with overpriced land along with exhausting farm labor. Turns out it wasn't easy farming oranges. Frost damage and infestations were never depicted in all those enticing promotions and ads. After 1920, Los Angeles ad campaigns featured images of cars, golf, the ocean, resorts—a Los Angeles for tourists, not farmers. And while some L.A. farmers still harvested oranges, the meaning behind the orange groves had changed. All the glory was gone. The dream, you see, was only in the *attaining*, never the *having*, and not enough people ever had it.

The funny thing about this student sitting before me is that he may very well have It. Capital "I" lower case "t"—It. And the It he may have is Literary Genius. He has It, and he doesn't know it. In fact, he probably doesn't even care. "Genius" is not a title that he would even want.

For years I've been reluctant to use the "G" word when it comes to writers. I've always chalked up the concept of Writer as Genius to some Romantic Era myth. Yet the idea of literary genius predated the Romantics

by 1,800 years. Before the birth of Christ, Horace bristled at the idea of genius and genius alone, mocking so-called Genius Poets with long beards and uncut nails, urging them to learn the conventions of their craft. To this day, conventions are shunned as dreaded "rules." Self-proclaimed Geniuses still stroll college campuses, seeing Genius as a condition of brilliance that has no need for skill or discipline.

As a professor of creative writing, I know too many writing tricks to believe in Genius; like the magician's apprentice, when you know how the tricks work, nothing is magic. The idea of Genius intimates that good writing is easy and innate, something that extremely gifted people are born with, a magical sixth sense. In reality, good writing is a product of hard work and refinement. Like masterfully playing the violin, good writing is a learned skill. Despite this, students all over the world pick up pens and make claims of literary greatness without so much as learning the literary equivalent of playing scales.

"What do you do about the Geniuses?" a fellow professor of creative writing once asked me. He went on to say, "I have two Geniuses in the same fiction writing class and can't do a damn thing with them." Pray to Horace, I should have told him, because there's not much an instructor can do. Genius is a phase, a condition of ignorance, not greatness. It is a label that preempts a writer from being questioned or challenged: Genius is godly and infallible, a state of creative perfection. It's also a state that does not exist: An idea, a construct, a misrepresentation of the labor that goes into writing, a myth that turns the hardest won sentence into easy magic that spills from typing fingertips.

Until now, my reality has consisted of Damn Good Writers, not Geniuses, writers who labor against their own fallibility, cringing at their literary imperfections, acknowledging every indulgence in sentiment, wincing at every scrap of purple prose. With each literary risk, they understand why they are breaking conventions and anticipate how the audience will react. Damn Good Writers are self-effacing, embarrassed to see defects in their writing, humbled by their failure to achieve literary perfection. And perfection is not a state of being but a quality of writing, a tenor

in the prose that is always just out of grasp. Rarely do such writers see how their own writing sparkles, how it glimmers with brilliance precisely because it is made to look so effortless. Such is the fate of Damn Good Writers: They never know how great they really are.

Certainly Literary Geniuses have graced the earth, but these individuals were dubbed geniuses by posterity, not self-proclamation. Truth be told, the student writers who label themselves Geniuses don't say it outright; they insinuate it with their arrogance. "How dare you critique me? I am a Writer," a student once raged at me. These students mistakenly equate the high of creativity with Genius, not realizing there is a word for this high, *afflatus*, "divine inspiration," and it's no accident the word *afflatus* is father to the word *flatulence*. You see, student Geniuses are filled with nothing but hot air. Except for this Hillbilly, this Cattle Rancher, this Farmer's Son who doesn't call himself a Genius and doesn't have anything to prove.

This May-Be Genius has been sitting with me for an hour, talking about California, evading the fact that he has come here to discuss what he cannot write down. I finally have to ask him, "What is it that you're evading?" Holding out the last essay he wrote, I say, "You write about the Dead, the beat-up lives of the poor, the broken dreams. But in this essay you don't write about any one person in particular. What is it that you're afraid of?"

"My wife," he replies. He then tells me a story of how something that he loved slipped away from him, how before he even knew it, she was gone. "Methamphetamines," he says.

"Oh." I nod. I know. I feel it in the tone of his voice. A devoted husband to the bitter end, he is hurting still. "Well," I ask, "is she relevant?"

"Of course she's relevant."

"Then you know what you have to do."

Reluctant, he shakes his head and turns his squint-lines away from me. As he avoids eye contact, I realize I must eat my own words: I too must write about the husband that I lost, the man who slipped into rages and was gone before either one of us had actually left. You see, he, too, is relevant.

This is my secret tragedy, the story that nobody knows, the story of

how I—a fiction writer—believed in labor, toil and skill, and how my ex-husband—a poet—believed in Genius. At least he claimed to believe in Genius during our last phone conversation. I will not go into the gory details. I will say only this: During our separation, before the divorce papers had arrived in the mail, he called me in a fury. We hadn't spoken for weeks. I'd been advised to transcribe all conversations with him, so I sat at the dining room table writing down each word he uttered, even telling him that I was writing it down to give him a chance to censor himself when he said to me, "Why is it, Stacy, why is it that you can't admit that I'm a Poetic Genius?" The tone in his voice suggested that I'd been holding out for years, secretly harboring the knowledge that he was a Genius just to spite him.

I could have said some damning words in that instant. Instead I was too stunned to say anything at all. I held my pen aloft, no longer able to transcribe the rant that followed, nor paying attention to what he was saying. I was stunned not so much that he thought he was a Genius but that *any* educated adult could think in terms of Poetic Genius. Didn't he know that that Roland Barthes declared, "The Author is dead," and along with the author died Poetic Genius?

If my ex-husband believed what he'd said, then we'd been living in two different worlds all along. In his Literary Disneyland, Genius Authors still existed. Back in my postmodern world, the last Genius Author died quietly and alone, gluttoned on the polysemy of his words.

I sincerely hope that my ex-husband misspoke, or perhaps I misunderstood. He worked hard on his poetry, so asking to be called a Genius may have been a botched demand for respect.

Still, it's probably no coincidence that a real Genius had indeed influenced my ex-husband's life, and that Genius was his Father, also a Poet, but not a Poetic Genius. His father's Genius was in the area of linguistics. It happened that he also wrote damn good poetry and had published numerous collections of poems.

I spent years going in and out of the Father's house, a house where two-year-old rejection letters from academic journals sat on the kitchen

counter alongside piles of unopened mail. Whenever I spent the night, in the morning I'd wake to find copies of obscure literary magazines on the breakfast table—*Drumvoices* and *Sou'Wester*—some over ten years old that the Father had been casually rereading over his English muffin. After breakfast, the Father would sit down and tell stories of meeting Robert Frost and C.S. Lewis. And after dinner, he'd rant about the living-dead—about something Robert Pinsky said at a party eight years ago, about a tiramisu “incident” involving Anthony Hecht.

It was in this household, as I stepped over lounging cats and piles of dusty books, that I walked up the attic stairs and found a scrap of paper lying on the middle step as if it had drifted in through the open attic window. It was the fragment of a poem the Father had written about standing on a ladder in a grove, picking oranges “deep gold with greeny tinges, warm to fingers / closing despite the ladder's shaking— / and then a turning cautiously on rungs to toss / the last tree-ripened navel orange into / the sure and waiting hands below.”

Not expecting to read such poetry on a casual stroll to the attic, I still recall how this poem rushed through my body and sent me on an astral trip halfway across the continent to reach for a hard-won orange. For me, that's what a moment of Genius feels like—like being transported to that orange grove and holding the orange in my hand. It was merely a moment of Genius, not a perpetual condition, a glimmering moment. So the Father was an academic Genius who might also be a Damn Good Poet. As for the Son, none of his poems put an orange in my hand, not even an orange stolen from under the sun. Yet his poems came so very close that I wish I'd told him, “Shut up and reach,” during that last phone call. “It's almost within your grasp.”

This Hillbilly, this Cattle Rancher, this Farmer's Son has so many moments of Genius that it gives me the chills. I find myself *not* in my office but standing alone in his rock house above the Jacks Fork River, longing for his lost wife to return. I am in his boots, on his worn floorboards, waiting for a sign.

So here we sit, not to talk about Literary Genius, not to talk about orange groves, but to talk about finding the right words for his lost wife, but now he's distracted. He can't get the orange groves out of his head.

"If I wanted to find the last orange grove in Los Angeles, how would I go about finding it?" he asks.

"I guess there are old people who'd know, perhaps old men in rocking chairs sitting on dusty porches."

"So I'll just have to go from one rocking chair to the next until I get there."

"That's how it'll have to be done." I don't tell him that all those old people may already be dead, that I sat over their graves as a youth.

When did the last orange grove in Los Angeles disappear? There's no way of knowing for sure. No monument in The National Museum of Natural History commemorates it. No one placed its obituary in *The Los Angeles Times*. Now it's fallen upon me to tell this May-Be Genius that none of it exists. Los Angeles is full of cemeteries and theme parks. Not fruit groves. Even Anaheim's last orange grove was chopped down, so Walt Disney's Magic Kingdom could be built.

Instead of telling him all this, I think of Bukowski's ranting father and all the student Geniuses who still believe in myths. Would they want to hear the truth? That there's no such thing as easy success, no such thing as a Literary Disneyland. There's only labor, skill and toil—all things my student knows.

And what if I tell my student that he's a Literary Genius? It won't bring his wife back, won't save a dying cow. It won't hold together the community he's trying to prevent from falling apart. Genius is a label that's only worth something to a man who's got nothing else. It holds no value in the Ozarks, nor any currency among Farmer's Sons.

Finally I tell him the only thing I can think to say: "You are your own damn orange grove."

That's it. Not enough. But it's all he needs to know.

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