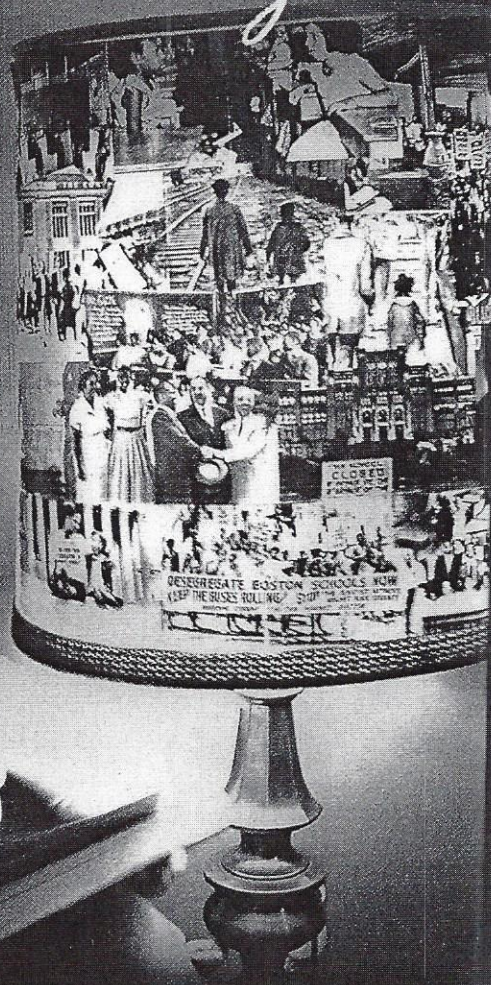


Guidebook to Relative Strangers

JOURNEYS INTO
RACE, MOTHERHOOD,
AND HISTORY



Camille T. Dungy

WRITING HOME

When I was a girl-child, home was a street called Bluff View, the uppermost block in a terraced neighborhood of Southern Californian houses. In the summer, when I was young and untired and forced to bed before the sun went down, my lullaby was the view my bedroom window afforded of the hills behind my house. Desert oak, prickly pear, eucalyptus, sage: I fell asleep cataloging this place. In the daytime, I would scramble over one bluff and up the hill behind it, playing teacher in the caves my neighbors and I found, scratching lessons in the chalky sand that lined the walls. We played doctor with stethoscopes fashioned from rocks and the necklaced stalks of wild mustard. We knew the contours and passages of those hills like we knew the halls and classrooms of our other, inside, school. Walking down a slope is different than walking on flat land, and each part of my legs recorded required positions until they could move as correctly up and down those bluffs as

my tongue might move over the alphabet. My body memorized its place in those hills.

But even while I lived at the center of everything I knew, everything I knew erased itself. Before I entered high school, construction had begun on summit estates for our town's growing mogul class. The hilltop was leveled and two of my favorite caves were lost. From my bedroom window I could now see the red tile roof of the pizza king's palacio. Less desert oak. A weaker scent of sage. When my parents bought the house on Bluff View, our backyard marked the edge of human landscaping. It was not uncommon to find tumbleweed resting in our lounge chairs, to leave wild poppies blooming along the margins of cut grass. Now the hills were asphalt and ice plant. The wild dogs we called coyotes moved down into our backyards, fighting with raccoons over scraps from overturned trash cans and preying on small pets.

Development in California means the building of homes, the imposition of landscaping, the digging of pools. Development in California means controlling what exists and creating something new, something only the diversion of rivers for the maintenance of reservoirs can sustain. Development in California means the mass irrigation of newly planted lawns. Houses, houses everywhere and not a wild mustard field to see. Not even the acres of organized agriculture that first moneyed the region survive. The City of Orange in Orange County kept an orange tree in a fenced area, a skinny-branched specimen saved to represent the fields for which the region was named. I grew up on a street called Bluff View in the midst of California's ambition

for development. When I write about nature, I am writing about loss. I am writing about discovering home where home has been replaced by structures I do not want to recognize. The place I was born into no longer exists. I don't have a town I can call home. Unless language is home. Unless, when I write, what had slipped away is found.

Once, I knew the silence and wind-cry of my California hills. In California, the sky speaks with a clipped tongue. Mountains shoulder into the conversation, the ocean sighs in frustration, and that frustration rolls over us, is fog. Say the sky and the sea have been arguing all night. Say the mountain blanketed itself and withdrew into silence but the sky and the sea kept at it through the night. Say it is finally morning. When the ocean rolls its wave-blue eyes and sighs, no one will believe the bright points the sky still holds on to. When I lived in California, I was at home in the language of sky and mountaintop and sea. But what my parents came to California to find began to slip away and we moved away as well.

I found myself in Iowa and believed for a long time that I had lost my home. The language of place is a slow speech to learn. Iowa is blue uninterrupted, blue talking all day and a darker blue still talking through the night. Just the waist-high tips of new corn there to listen, and they not saying anything, only nodding their young heads. A new language. I moved to Iowa and didn't write for months. When a poem finally came, it was written in a different tongue.

Now it is half my lifetime since I lived on Bluff View, and I have traveled enough and moved enough to know that home is

not a place. I am thinking perhaps home is not language, either. Language is too easy to lose. Perhaps home is memory.

It is years later and I am a traveler, walking. I am on public land: a park, a knoll, a meadow. I am glad to own the memories I own and through those memories to belong someplace, to have some place belong to me. I am remembering, and I am writing a poem in my many tongues. A poem having to do with comfort; something having to do with peace. Then a dog comes growling toward me. A dog with still tail and pointed ears. A dog with fanged mouth and purposeful eyes.

The sky is quiet, and the dog is barking, and someone the dog trusts and will obey says, *Sic her, sic.*

If memory is home, I am a long way from hope. I have escaped and am running. I have to remember what has been said: I am black and female; no place is for my pleasure. How do I write about the land and my place in it without these memories: the runaway with the hounds at her heels; the complaint of the popular at the man-cry of its load; land a thing to work but not to own? How do I write about the land and my place in it without remembering, without shaping my words around, the history I belong to, the history that belongs to me? The dog drags me to fields of memory where I toil from can see to can't. What I write about the land and my place in it is informed by this fact: Sometimes the landscape is of little comfort. Sometimes I want to run far away from home.

When I was a child in the hills behind the street called Bluff View, I knew no threat nor fear. Development, the advancement of possession, had not pushed coyotes from the hillside into our

backyards. My poems are informed by displacement and oppression, but they are also informed by peace, by self-possession. When I was a child on Bluff View, the dogs we call bloodhounds, the slave trackers' tool, were nothing I knew to remember. I was a girl-child in that kingdom of open space, and all the land I could see and name and touch was mine to love. No one, no thing, possessed another, nothing was developed apart from my heart. When I was a child in the hills behind the street called Bluff View, there was no such thing as history. Sometimes my poems rest again in that quiet space, that comfort.

The dog is closer. A woman repeats her command, but it is something altogether different this time.

Sit, girl. Sit.