

Osprey

Summer.

Something about the glare of noon. Or nearabouts noon because summertime that hour feels like eternity, the essence of the season itself, halfway between here and there, stopped. Something about the stillness of light, and the motionless surface of the green river. On a dry path above the water even the orange-flowering monkey plant and sticky-leafed mountain balm appear to be waiting, as if for the sun to move again. Until an osprey breaks out of the sky, silver body and black-tipped wings, coursing the snaking path of the river.

All at once, it's the same light, the season again forty years ago, and the girl below the ferris wheel at the county fair will come along the path with the boy just now heading for the carnival from the livestock barn. She does not know him; wouldn't imagine ever knowing him. But the light is open, empty all around her—nevermind the throngs of people, the cotton candy and hot dogs, or the shrieks pouring from the two-story ferris wheel behind her—and anything is possible. Her friends have gone to toss rings for a stuffed bear. She is alone. She is free.

She sits on a bench and pulls a compact from her purse. She wears a pink and black polka-dot blouse with a ruffled front and a black fitted skirt she borrowed from her older sister. She is Indian but she could be Annette Funicello. She could be different. Not like overweight Lynette, whose legs are like stovepipes, or Betty, her other friend, with cat eye horn-rimmed glasses, poor thing.

She would say it was all like a movie, how, when she looked up, after snapping her purse shut, he was there—her lipstick was on and she looked perfect—and he walked up to her, and he had a car.

She knew better, she would say, too. She wasn't a fool. She was sixteen, after all. She just wasn't thinking. He talked while he drove. He was from Petaluma, on the outskirts. His family had a dairy; he showed cows at the fair, registered Holsteins. That morning, first show, he had won a blue ribbon. It was his lucky day, he said. He'd met Mexican girls before. He liked them. She didn't tell him her name, that it was Linda, and that her last name was as American as all get out, but if he had asked and she had told him he would know she wasn't Mexican, or certainly not all Mexican.

He called the place Wohler Bridge.

She knew it only as the bridge on Eastside Road, the place where Filipinos once held cockfights, big get-togethers, where Indian women went to meet those Filipino dandies in pin-striped suits and Panama hats, handling bets and squawking, razor-fitted roosters with equal aplomb. Which she thought of after the boy parked the car and they traversed the dusty parking lot, heading for the trail—how last summer, or the summer

before last, her aunts pointed to the place and mentioned as much while driving over the bridge on their way to pick pears someplace.

The boy led the way. Coming around a bend, she saw the monkey plant and mountain balm alongside the path, orange flowers, clumps of sticky leaves. Nothing moved there. Up ahead the path narrowed into a dark copse of willow. She looked back and could no longer see the parking lot or the bridge spanning the river. Then she remembered what her aunts had said, how, finished with their stories about cockfights, they cast their gaze in this direction and were quiet, if only for a moment, before they told the story.

The boy must have thought she was crazy. Without a word, she turned and walked in the opposite direction, as if somehow she could get back to the parking lot without him noticing. There, in view of the bridge and the well-traveled road that led to it, they talked, never mentioned her abrupt about-face. They skirted talk of fear or dashed hope. He was a gentleman, she said, this handsome white boy with a mess of close-cropped blond curls and powder blue eyes. His small mouth widened unbelievably, unnaturally even, into a broad white smile, which he wasn't doing so much now.

"I didn't know what to tell him," Linda told me, "how to describe what I saw."

She paused, shrugged her shoulders. She asked if I wanted more lemonade. Already, at ten in the morning, the temperature outside was ninety degrees. The kitchen, where we sat, was stifling, even with the windows pushed open. The apartment was on the second floor, which didn't help matters, and above a corner deli: I smelled onions and fried meat. Every now and then, our conversation was punctuated by the ring of an old-fashioned cash register.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"The whole story."

"What story?"

Then she said what she saw.

A woman on the path. Coming with the man wearing the straw sombrero. Her hair, which was fixed for Sunday mass at St. Rose Church, though jet black, resembles Rita Hayworth's flowing red mane in Gilda. She wears a plain skirt and blouse set off by a wide patent leather belt and matching shoes. Her stomach swells slightly below the belt; she's not pregnant, thank God: today or tomorrow she will menstruate. Thank God, because she has six children, hard enough already.

She was both surprised and thankful that the man wearing the sombrero showed up at her door last night. Surprised because she had wronged him, exercised poor judgment with a co-worker in the hop fields, poor judgment he was made privy to;

thankful because how many men would be willing to care for a woman with six kids, and then give the woman a second chance.

That was what he had said in the dim porch light: a second chance. He'd come directly to her house after twelve hours mending apple crates in Sebastopol. Their lovemaking was rigorous. In the morning they went to church. He had only his work clothes but she had ironed them. He showered and used her oldest boy's aftershave. He left his hat on the pew when they took Communion. After, he wanted to go for a ride, just the two of them, the kids could take care of themselves.

She knew a place.

She picked mountain balm with her grandmother and great-aunts there. She remembered summer days, and the sharp scent of the herb, but, most of all, the appeal of the slow-moving green water. She knew about the cockfights—what Indian woman hereabouts didn't?—which was how she knew where to direct him off the road to park.

Just north, upriver from where they left the car, there was a wide, empty circle of tramped earth. A column of fennel, like a gatepost, grew alongside the trail. Chicken feathers specked the ground and clung to clumps of chaparral that loosely enclosed the circle; gold and red and black feathers, like leftover decorations. A faint line of smoke wafted from a heap of ashes. The still emptiness of the scene, felt in the noonday light, emboldened her. Crossing the circle, she felt alive, complete, as if she had been present at the cockfight the night before and alone survived its chaos. She was not carrying another man's baby. They could start over, a clean slate, her and the man wearing the straw sombrero.

They pass the orange flowers and taller, sticky-leafed plants; no doubt, the man is leading now, because he sees, up ahead, where it is they are going. She isn't paying attention. Maybe she's glancing down at her shoes, seeing how dust has filled the cracks in her patent leather: miniscule etchings, like rivers drawn on a map. And, all at once, in the blink of an eye, they are in the willows, the woman and the man, and she is looking back to the light.

Did she feel a chill in the shadows, and remember again her grandmother and the herbs, not the sun and warm days but winter time, when she had a cold, felt a tightening in her chest, and the old woman was taking the dried leaves from a Mason jar to boil tea? Or maybe she was just looking back up the trail, if only for a way back to the light? Or maybe she didn't have time, even to comprehend what he was saying, that no other man would have her, for it happened so fast, one of his arms securing her head, the other forcing the hot blade into her swelled abdomen again and again.

Linda knew details. Did her aunts read the man's confession in a newspaper? Did they see a photo of him? Or had an ordinary and horrible story grown legs and feet?

“I didn’t really see her until I was back at the car,” Linda said. “It was just this thing that came over me...Stupid, I guess. That boy was cute. He must’ve thought I was an idiot. We kept talking—How could I tell him I was seeing that woman looking back at me?”

“Maybe she thought of her moon,” I suggested.

I figured she wouldn’t engage, at least not favorably, the moon idea—that the tragic woman, in her last moments, thought of the menstrual taboo, that not only during her menstruation, but also immediately before and after, a woman mustn’t hike in the brush, particularly near a body of water, such as a river—but I wanted to impress her with my knowledge of such things. Linda was proudly Catholic; though aware of Indian traditions, she mostly scoffed at them as backwards.

We were cousins, both of us descendants of Tom Smith, the legendary Coast Miwok medicine man, though at the time neither of us knew. More than anything else, we were friends: we’d met almost ten years before in junior high, when I had a crush on her (an older suitor eclipsed any chance I might have had). I’d moved to Los Angeles a year and half earlier and was home in Santa Rosa visiting. She had acquired the apartment recently and wanted me to see it.

My mind kept whirling with the story she told, imaging the woman’s state of mind, the significance of the gruesome tale—and Linda’s experience too, what it meant for her at the time as a sixteen year old. She didn’t preoccupy herself with so-called Indian lore then either, but hadn’t certain notions crossed her mind? Even now, seven years later, wasn’t she repressing thoughts of taboo?

As if she was reading my mind, she answered dryly, “What difference does it make, a woman got murdered, isn’t that enough?”

I was gazing out her window, to the rooftops across the street. I looked back to her, if only not to be rude.

The first time I had been to Wohler Bridge, passing over it, was with Mabel McKay, the renown Pomo basketmaker and doctor, who taught me about everything worthwhile I know. Again, it was summertime, the year before I moved to Los Angeles. In those days, I often drove Mabel to pick herbs or dig sedge for basketmaking. If I remember correctly, we were on our way to Dry Creek to explore the sedge beds (now below Warm Springs Dam’s three hundred feet of water).

As always, she was noting features of the landscape. She nodded up river and said that she had heard of a good place to pick mountain balm there. Was it her longtime friend Essie Parrish who told her of the place? We were somewhere in border territory, historically shared by Coast Miwok, Kashaya Pomo, and Southern Pomo—obviously not

in Mabel's native Cache Creek Pomo region of eastern Lake County. But what I remember is her mentioning how, at that time of year, the mountain balm, indeed many herbs, would be mature; "mature time" was how she put it, and I was struck, finding not only her use of the word but her tone, more suitable to a group of well-behaved school children, or perhaps an elder, say a woman after menopause.

When I visited Linda, I was on my way to Wohler Bridge, on my way back I should say, for a second visit. On a tip from a friend I'd learned of the place as a haven for nude sunbathing. It was 1974. I was twenty-two years old. I didn't tell her that I had been to the place, or that I was on my way back, only that I'd heard that young people were hanging out there, nude sunbathing, which was what prompted her stories. We had gone our separate ways, her to a job, me away to college: I wasn't certain how she felt about the idea of public nudity and didn't want to offend her sense of propriety.

That seems so long ago. Recently, Linda let me know, with an ironic chuckle, that she was aware of my visits to Wohler Bridge. A mutual friend described my presence there, Linda said, "in a flattering manner." Now I was the one embarrassed, a middle aged man face-to-face with a middle aged female cousin and childhood friend. Today we know our connection to Tom Smith, how exactly we are cousins. And I know many stories that connect me to the place in specific ways: Tom Smith and other Coast Miwok ancestors followed the Russian River inland from the coast to pick herbs there (long before the appearance of a bridge), mountain balm, as well as angelica which once grew in abundance in a damp recess nearby; and, many years later, my Filipino grandfather, with my Coast Miwok grandmother (Tom Smith's granddaughter) on his arm, watched the notorious cockfights, saw feathers fly there.

I returned to Wohler Bridge several times. I watched the crowds dwindle, particularly as the door closed on the now unbelievable era between the pill and AIDS, and then altogether disappear when the property owner, reputed to have been the late actor Fred MacMurray, fenced off all access and posted very noticeable No Trespassing signs. Older now, I am nostalgic for those days of bliss in the sun. I went there to relax, escape worries of school and whatever else, to forget.

This morning, thirty-five years since my first visit, I returned once more. Driving along Eastside Road, across the bridge, adjacent the stand of redwoods, I discovered a parking lot, then, past an open chainlink gate, a trail leading back to the river. An Asian couple stood fishing on the shore, dungarees rolled up to their knees, crude bamboo poles extended over the green water. Farther upriver, parked against a massive redwood trunk, one man, and then not far away, another, both clad in flannel shirts on this hot day, stared out at the river and beach across. Were they waiting for fun reminiscent of the old days, or just remembering it?

I forged the river, swam across. Still a beach; no people on this side but still a beach, sand, the water. And of course that eternal summer light. I plopped down, felt the beach sand, cool water dripping down my shoulders.

The osprey, that magnificent bird that burst from the empty sky, broke my bliss. I watch now as it follows the river and vanishes as effortlessly as it appeared. I've seen ospreys here before. Like this one, they always seem to come from nowhere. A knowledgeable fellow sunbather from days gone by speculated that ospreys had a nest in the redwoods across the water. She said they had great vision, able to see far distances and into the water many, many feet—their eyes are shielded from the sun's reflection on the water's surface. They can live thirty years or more. Had I seen this same bird before? Was it now searching the water for a plump carp?

Still, even in the osprey's absence, the place stirs; the world is set in motion again and the hours march slowly on. The faintest trace of shadow. The monkey plant and the mountain balm, leaning, anticipate the afternoon. My mind is wild with stories.

I think of them all: Linda and the farm boy with the blond curls; the woman with Rita Hayworth hair and the man wearing the straw sombrero; my grandfather and grandmother and the swirling dust of fighting roosters; old man Tom Smith, one leg slightly bowed, picking mountain balm leaves. Then, just as fast, I remember Mabel, not when we drove over the bridge, when she said "mature," but her warning me—I hear her actually—saying not to tell stories after and before the frost, after and before winter season, not only because you must pay attention to where you are going, watchful for snakes and such, but because you too are coming out, becoming story. It was the rule, she said, and added, for my benefit it seemed, that it was silly to think of stories all the time.

But the stories won't let up. They converge in a moment. My own story, I think, what happened when I came back here after visiting Linda.

I see it.

Coming along the dusty path, the orange flowers and sticky leaves coming into view, even the copse of willow up ahead, and I'm thinking of the stories I have just heard. But, no matter, because I don't follow the path; turn to the beach instead.

There are lots of people: unclad bathers lining the sand.

It is a glorious day, and I am glorious in it. I am twenty-two. Earlier, before my stop at Linda's apartment, I paid a visit to the gym: I still feel pumped up. My seventies stylishly-long hair, mustache...But I wasn't thinking about stories, and this is the same story again. No, not the set of eyes I felt upon me, even when I turned and glimpsed beside a cottonwood the spectacular form clad only in a string of beads, telling myself to compliment the beads, talk about the damn multicolor beads, not even the line drawn in the sand by the shade. But when I stopped, before a single thought. Then, for however

long, that moment, I was more alive and smart in this place, indeed in the whole world, than ever before.

That was summer, I am thinking. Knowing summer for the first time.

Then my reverie is broken by the sound of a truck approaching on a dirt road behind me, and I remember that I am trespassing. I dive into the water, heading for the other side.