

Christopher Buckley

Alisos Canyon Contract

A child in the affluence
of space and leaves,
I walked out agreeing
with the trees. At my command,
the grand inheritance of the sky,
an affidavit summoned
above the sandstone and
perpetual oaks, a blank page
in back of the coastal range
on which clouds scribbled
my three initials —
proof of everything
left to me under the sun.

I hiked or rode a bike there
for the day-long business
of climbing house-size rocks,
monitoring the white
surf-curls and backwash
of indigent clouds.

Cars slid by
down the distant road, so many
fish shining through their deep
and watery gates. My ambition
was to gather waist-high foxtails
with my open hand. My distractions
were tangerines burning
like day-time stars in the tops
of the one foothill grove,
a buzzard tilting in his dark patrol.
No one knew me as I
knew myself in my green

and adaptable heart.
Cochise, Robin Hood, Johnny Ringo,
The Cisco Kid, I lived
those lives at once,
and no one quicker
to draw against shadows
or track the venomless lizards
to their hide-outs in stone,
to send a silver-tipped arrow
into the soft belly of a log.
Who knew better the cutoffs
and switchback paths, the crossing
rocks in pools, the free-fall stanzas
of the creek high into the hills
and all the lost Himalayas?

I believed as I was told —
anyone who wished could
have it all. The evidence
was plain as daylight
as far as I could see —
there was plenty, and plenty to share,
would always be — this was easy
as the air.

And as if that too
were a place you could go,
just by saying so, I stood still
in the wind and claimed
the franchise of the light
across the breathing fields.

Where did I go once
sycamores set their last star-
yellow leaves against autumn
and gave way to the grey
murmur of the boughs?
Sunset, and the yucca
and agapanthus blooms
are at a loss to say.
Here, a dull dusk covers

the day's remains, copperish
 as the edge of a coin. Riffraff
 of the lesser skies, sparrows
 and mockers, offer up a run-down
 of my immediate life and times,
 the scratch in the dust
 I've made, the here and now
 beyond the softened margins,
 the sea-colored needles
 of tamarisk and pine —
 the incessant breeze that just picks
 at the surface of things.

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And if I look, as it has become
 my weakness to look, for something
 to correspond, to pull in to myself —
 lure and sparkling spinner —
 it's one star shooting lengthwise,
 a nylon line cast past the surf,
 a flare across the smudge pot night
 that goes under with the dead
 weight of hope . . . And memory
 sputtering against a screen,
 the early outline of that dark
 for an instant or so, silvered
 into smoke — spokes to a wheel
 of vaporous gauze.

Sky with all
 the house lights left on,
 floating basin of the Milky Way
 shifting left, footloose
 in its freight, and no place
 now for pity, reflexive as palm leaves
 sprung into the windy night.

This
 is the little prayer that wakes me,
 calls me back from a landscape
 where trees are not cold

enough to be quiet,
has me up early with the wind,
repeating everything. . . .

I want to tell myself
this is how the world can be —
sky with its citrus glaze, salt
off the spindrift stars,
an aquifer of light.
This is all there has to be
besides the old street to the sea,
where I pray for the gale off the bay,
the belled catalpa leaves
asking, do you still want to fly?
And the green knowledge
of those sail-shaped leaves lifted
a moment and hovering
like the frigate bird
down the sky to Ecuador.
Evening pulling off its long gloves,
a parchment-white sheen
thrown open above the cliffs
where the blue life of air is forfeit
again to the poverty of my arms.