

[Three Poems + Commentary]

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by Stephanie Mood

Death Valley, California

We never hear screams
when the earth falls running
and the rocks play tag
crashing up down below.

The bulldozers move in
and the quiet ache of the snakes
flees silently with the rats' moanings
and the trees crack with pain
we do not hear.

When senses fail, the skin dries out blood
like the valley they called death
cursing behind blistered backs.
The foghorns shrilled eerily
down that robber baron tunnel;
the sun cooked all life
and the earth tumbled crazed
downside up
throwing its bowels towards heaven
while jackrabbits and mice died
painlessly, as from some gas or a hemlock.

Here in civilized America
we still debate the death penalty.
Everybody gets the death penalty:
the boulder hung poised overhead
or a sudden jab in the throat
stealing fast, like swift flat-nosed sharks.

The scars on huge mountains slung grandly up
belie the beauty of skin smooth as a jewel;
its cuts are colorful as open wounds
lying in layers like blankets or flavors
giant knuckles of uplifted earth
soon buried in their own gentle rubble.
Scum undulates like women
in putrified water
and pupfish live because the valley died.
Sifting borax blinds saltbeds of fire
while gold loses itself and expires in the relentless
living air.

The earth kills itself
and there's no one to weep
all ears wax and wane
while nostrils drink dust.
Dead things become colors
clouds dance a new rain
our bones decay smiling
atoms wave where we've been.

Elementary

You come in big
and high from the beach
though your shoulders are small
your arm is in place around the red board
and your orange swim trunks are
just where they should properly be
but I know the way your ass curves
soft as a sea mollusk
the line I trace with my finger
reaching under, coming up to the tip
and the foam of the wave.

You come in dripping with saltwater
a thousand kisses riding home
You swim in on your feet like whales
spinning weightlessly off a piece of air
a shaft of light, off the shoulders of the sea.
Down below, it is magical there
and I know the world of the fish and curving grass
billions of hidden stars, I've seen them.
I've kissed you, too, because you come in
because our eyes are watering each other
and our lives are naked together in the air.

Promise

If your finger traced these curving hills
you'd understand the round air of night.
If your arms enfolded the eucalyptus tufts
you'd see that life grows here even from rocks.
Perhaps you might swallow thick salt mist
and then you'd know the joy of breathing from the mouth;
maybe one day you'd find that dream
in the next hole of the wave that whispers in walls.

This is the West.
The land stops here.
The urge curls in the sand and laughs here.

Eyes become sailors here
and hands wave waving to waves loving sprays.
Here we are blue miners
we trek our paths in the sea
which glistens off the edge of the globe
and into the sky making endless love to its clouds.
Asia is over there and we squint wrinkles searching
until we find a mirage of silver whales splashing south to spawn.

Now, we are not birds or fish or even sailors
but here in the West
on this land of mountains, deserts, sea and valleys,
with the Mexican border just down the beach,
we can eat as fruit our place and time
in this old American dream
of a new sun going down every day.

Commentary by Stephanie Mood

These are three poems from my recent collection, *California Poems: Gold in Them Hills*. The title comes from Marshall Tucker Band's "Fire on the Mountain" — "lightning in the air, gold in them hills, and it's waitin' for me there." I love the idealized hope in those lines.

The Western frontier is endemic to the mythical end-of-the-American-rainbow-pot-of-gold—ripe with new beginnings and endless possibilities for better lives. This narrative, symbolized by the cowboy-into-the-sunset image, captured me early in movie theaters where my friends and I would be driven by our parents and left to ourselves for a Saturday afternoon, eating popcorn and watching cowboy heroes tame the West for the beautiful women who loved them enough to wave good-bye at the end of the show. In my case, I rode off together with my cowboy into the sunset of the West.

The West is certainly vast enough to contain all kinds of stories; the sky seems to go on forever in the West, and even today, with burgeoning populations of human migrations, the promise of the West beckons. But despite the idealized endless boundary of this dream, the West stops at the shorelines of the Pacific: "This is the West./ The land stops here./ The urge curls in the sand and laughs here." When my husband and I left Indiana together, we traveled as far West as we could, and we finally stopped at the Southwestern corner of the United States, and here we have stayed, laughing a lot, crying too, saluting and celebrating the gift of each day.

The poems in *Gold in Them Hills* speak to the experiences of a narrator new to this kind of promise: the start of a new beginning, the joy of discovery and love, the pain of loss and loneliness, and always, the essential importance of a poetic vision that can embrace the inherent tensions that such journeys offer.

Many of the poems center around people, both real and imagined ("Elementary"). Writers create characters based on personal experience, of course, but the process of word, line, and rhythm choices transforms those characters into something universal; the circle that results from how the images work probes the corners of space and time. We are all inextricably a part of each other, humans, animals, plants, rocks, earth, sky, ocean.

The years go by so fast; writing is a way to keep those years close to the heart. A poem is a meditation, and at its best, poetry is medicine for the poet and for the reader/listener. We learn by exploring sometimes uncomfortable truths, and the poetry heals our wounds. I include "Death Valley, California" because it is an example of these ideas. "Atoms wave where we've been." The air is full of everything that exists and that has existed.

Anyone interested can purchase a book on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, or other online book services. The book can also be ordered at any bookstore in the world.

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Stephanie Mood

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moved west from Indiana to San Diego with her husband in 1973 to start a new life. And it worked. In 1991 she became a full-time professor of creative writing, composition, and literature at Grossmont College in El Cajon, California, and has recently retired.