

the state, I was amazed by its multiplicity of landscapes—mountains, ocean, desert, farmland, redwood forests, and more, all there for me to explore. I am not a cultural geographer, but it seems to me that these two factors combine almost alchemically to create California’s biggest draw and its greatest myth—the dream of self-reinvention in a beautiful place where there is room for everyone. Or is it a dream? And if so, isn’t it the American one, taken all the way west? All I know is this: California altered me, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. I am not the same person I was before I spent a decade watching that ten-thousand-foot mountain framed in my kitchen window every morning. All those mornings live inside me still, shifting, kaleidoscopic, changing, their terrain mine. California’s richness and variety, its sense of possibility and permission, merged within me and became a kind of internal architecture, its beams supporting the house of who I am.

I carry California with me the way I carry abalone shells from Montaña de Oro, a piece of stone from the trail up the back side of Mt. Baldy, and a foot-long cone from a sugar pine I once found lying on a picnic table in the Sierras. At night sometimes, half a continent way, uneasily exiled in the Midwest, I think I can hear the ocean, mistaking the rhythm of my own pulse for saltwater, the crash and sibilant hiss of the retreating waves like the sound of rice thrown at a wedding, something mysterious and beautiful hidden within that sound. *Shush-shush*, the ocean says, and I listen.

Even now, out driving through a Wisconsin landscape, it’s taken me years to recognize it’s not really flat but rolling. I scan the horizon, looking for something vertical to get my back up against, a mountain by which to orient myself, something that will tell me that north is indisputably *north* by virtue of its invincible presence. I look for the Sierras floating, like the dreams of some nineteenth-century luminist painter, along the edge of the Central Valley, for the Coast Range edging the sea with a ruff of green. I look for the San Gabriels hunched—in one of the starkest juxtapositions of wilderness and civilization ever—in a jagged shield between the Los Angeles Basin, the San Gabriel and Pomona Valleys, and the high desert. And I look for “my” mountain,” Baldy, its bare, sun-bleached crown there in that kitchen window every day,

whether shrouded in mist or mantled in snow, burned like the visual equivalent for the word “home” into whatever indelible storage vault in the brain contains this kind of information. Where the mountains are. That is where I am, even years and miles away—shaken and exhilarated, companioned and changing, sunlight burning down upon me like beaten gold.

Alison Townsend is the author of *Persephone in America* and *The Blue Dress*. Her work appears widely, most recently in journals such as *Chautauqua*, *Parabola*, *Quarter After Eight*, *Southern Review*, and *Zone 3*. She had a “Notable Essay” mentioned in *Best American Essays 2014*. She is Professor Emerita of English at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, and is completing a collection of essays titled, *The Name for Woman Is River: Essays toward an Ecology of Home*.

CHER ROBERTS

Resting, 2013
Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 24 in



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