

## CHER ROBERTS

*Tea on the Veranda, 2014*  
Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36



COURTESY: THE ARTIST

## ALISON TOWNSEND

### California Girl

Life in the Golden State after  
growing up on the East Coast

*I was a California girl, in aesthetic and attitude.*

—Rosanne Cash

In a photo that exists nowhere but in my mind, I am caught, suspended in mid-leap between two granite boulders in a talus field at the base of the mountains that rise above Squaw Valley. I'm in my forties, just clear of a divorce that's burned through my life like a wildfire, and I'm visiting California for the first time since leaving it nearly a decade before. There in the guise of attending a writing conference devoted to nature and the environment, I am trying to write about my experience living in California, how the landscape itself acted upon me, changing the way I saw the world. But the truth is I've come to see if California—where my ex-husband was born and raised and where we met in graduate school and lived during our twenties and thirties—is still mine. The conference is a foil, offering me structure and purpose I might not have felt traveling to California on my own. While I'm enjoying the workshops and readings more than I expected, it's the landscape that draws me. Rising around Squaw like roughly carved pieces in a board game tossed down by giants, the granite blocks of the Sierra uplift exert an almost magnetic pull on my body and psyche. So I am glad to be sprung for a short afternoon ramble, the mountains' distinctive scent of dust-baked granite and pine rising around me in invisible welcome.

A friend who's traveled with me to the conference from where we live, in Madison, Wisconsin, hikes beside me. Although I haven't ever been on this particular trail before, having spent more time hiking or cross-country skiing in Yosemite, or exploring the San Gabriels, each step seems to take me deeper into something familiar in myself, something that I have forgotten or which has lain dormant, while I have struggled, so homesick for verticality in the Upper Midwest that I sometimes mistake cloud banks for the mountains. As we tramp along, moving into the rhythm of walking, a fizz of happiness rises from deep inside me, like the springs that feed Squaw Creek into the twist of tangled silver rushing downhill beside us. I lift my face to the sun. I feel sharply etched, limned by light, scraped as the boulder I stand on, as if I, too, have been hewn out of the ground, tumbled into a place different from where I started. Light glitters off the granite's rough surface like tiny jewels. Enlivened by the brilliance, I hop from boulder to boulder, darting and flashing like the Steller's jay I tossed peanuts to earlier in the day.