Citrus Roots: A Love Letter To My Hometown

I come from the lemon city,
from the gazebo downtown.

"Did you know,
that the first lemon trees
In California were planted in 1709?"

I come from the stone city,
Where we'd jump over walls,
just to paint our names in the hills.

I come from the trolley city,
a hidden landmark
outside my favorite library.

I come from the children's section,
From colorful shelves,
And alphabet tiles.

"Where do you consider your hometown?"

I come from the chaparral city,
Where the mountains always point north

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In 2020 when I was doing college remotely from my childhood bedroom, my professor gave us a survey to fill out to get to know all the people in the class. One of her questions was "Where do you consider your hometown?" and this has always been a kind of a complicated question for me.

I grew up in suburban Southern California, about 45 minutes east of Los Angeles. When my city was originally founded, it was much bigger and connected to many of the towns surrounding us. One formative memory of home is my 3rd grade field trip to all the local cities. On that field trip, we drove through all the historic downtowns, learned about which buildings used to be jails, libraries, and homes of city officials. But mostly we learned about the citrus industry, Socal's bread and butter.

There's a whole mythos to Southern California's citrus industry, that you only really begin to unlearn once you realize the story of the citrus industry completely erases indigenous perspectives, only drawing on the perspectives of the white men who profited from citrus production. Like the indigenous communities just left willingly and let them plant non-native tree species all over their sacred home.
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I wrote this poem I included about my hometown, because I was trying to find something real about this place, find what grounded me to my hometown, beyond the legends and myths I was taught in school.

In my elementary school P.E. classes they'd tell us to face north towards the mountains while completing our warm-up stretches, and remembering that always helps me orient myself when I walk or drive around my hometown. It also feels like a nod to the original stewards of this land. The landscape may have changed, we have all these buildings, and cars, and new communities of people, but there are also parts that stay the same, that still reflect the history of this place.

Maybe I'm just a sentimental taurus, with issues around accepting change, but that thought has been comforting to me, as society continues to evolve so rapidly.

Speaking of change, or lack thereof, no one really talks about it here, but the suburbs are still really segregated by class, and race. My city was predominantly Latinx, and my parents felt we'd get a better education in the whiter-next-door-city. (We don't have time to unpack all of that, but I will get to how this impacted me later).

So I would pass by completely different neighborhoods on my way to school. I lived on 6th street, and my school was on 18th street, so I would see the roads change, and the communities transition from the old houses of my neighborhood, to apartments, and motorhomes to the two-story-well-kept-houses of my upper middle class peers.

I would come home and speak in Spanglish, eat taquitos and watch poorly dubbed comedies on TV, and then go to school and learn all about how George Washington saved America.

So which one was home exactly?

Both, and neither. Somedays I was grateful for school, it was my escape from my parents' constant yelling, another couple staying together for the kids, that never should have been a couple at all.

Other days, I struggled to fit in with my classmates, I didn't understand their cultural references, and I got in trouble so often school stopped feeling like a safe refuge, and became yet another place I wanted to escape from.

I got good at dissociating, at watching my life from afar, pretending to not take things personally, at not being surprised when I was mistreated or ignored or neglected. I got good at taking up as little space as possible. To avoid tripping over my words, sometimes I chose to stop speaking altogether.

There were times that I wished I could speak up and stop what was happening to me, but somewhere along the way I started feeling powerless, and unable to prevent the violence and neglect I was subjected to, both at home and at school.

The only time I really felt excited and like I had autonomy over my life is when I was finally getting ready to move to college as the world started to emerge from the covid-era-lockdowns. I spent 3 years in community college, taking all the right classes, and doing everything I needed to transfer to a university. I saw college as my escape from my abusive house, and I chose a university 300 miles away in the Redwood forest. Thinking an artsy coastal forest town was the one place I could finally be myself.

But like most good things in life, a man stepped in and ruined it,

Maybe I let him ruin it, or at least, didn't try hard enough to stop it.

I avoided relationships my whole life, knowing I was susceptible to some really unhealthy relationship dynamics because I'd been abused so much as a kid. But he was my friend, or at least I thought he was, and I was a silly college girl who wanted to fit in, have a boyfriend like all my friends had growing up. Thought I could handle a little college fling.

I saw the red flags, told myself "If anyone else was doing this I'd run," but he assured me he wanted me to feel safe, and I felt like graduation was my safe ticket out anyway, since he lived in the Bay Area, and I was always going to come back to SoCal after graduation. I never really wanted long distance.

I flinched away when he tried to kiss me for the first time, something didn't feel right. We were alone in my room and I was scared, but he almost started crying, "Ohhh…d-d-do you not like me?"

Honestly it had only been a month, I was still trying to get to know him, and decide if this is what I wanted, but he had decided I was the girl of his dreams, only dreams don't last very long…

I knew everything was happening too fast but my dissociation also kicked in quick, letting me believe the fantasy he sold me while my body tucked itself into its own dream to escape what was really happening.

Then I found out was talking to my “friend” the whole time, opening up to her, telling her god-knows-what about me, and honestly this hurt me more than if he had been romantically into someone else, or physically cheated, because all I wanted was to be emotionally close to him. I saw him more as a friend than a partner, it was hard for me to see him that way, hard for me to want him that way.

I don’t blame myself anymore, it took months of therapy, crying, and hanging out with my old high school friends to remember what emotional safety felt like. And that’s when I decided to stop trying to escape, stop trying to run away.

I ran away from home so much, from my own emotions, I didn’t know what was real anymore, I couldn’t tell the difference between the illusions I believed, what stories I created to survive my pain. I needed to ground myself, I needed to come home, and choosing myself over my so-called-friends ended up being the key.

Back in SoCal it took me months to escape the fog in my head, it’s like my body never left the forest, the flood of emotions I tried to run from came back, begging me to heal them, all the alarm bells in my body still ringing, long after the smoke had cleared.

But I told myself, if I was coming home to my body, I was going to make it the safe place I never had. The safe place I kept trying to find outside of myself. I healed years worth of trauma in the months after my breakup, all while juggling 2 internships and grad school courses. I was crashing out and trauma dumping all over my instagram stories, but I stopped caring about how people perceived me, I just needed to get it all out.

Then all of a sudden, I didn’t hate SoCal anymore. I got on the train I used to take to community college to meet my friends in Little Tokyo, looked out the window and remembered how pretty LA looks after the rain, everything was so green. I sat on a seaside cliff in San Diego, right after my last phone call with my ex, and thought that this wasn’t a bad place to be heartbroken, at least I had the sea, and the mountains, and the citrus trees.

I joined local activist communities, I volunteered at a community run bookstore, I picked vegetables at local community run farms, I took a poetry class, I held my friends' hands in the hospital when her sister got cancer, I cried at her funeral, and realized the whole time I'd been trying to escape my life, thinking I'd only be worth something if I moved away and got a degree…

I'd already been so loved by my friends, I'd accomplished so much, I lived in a beautiful city with people I appreciated, my silly life had an impact on people, so I let go of the dream of running away, and finally started to feel deserving of my life.

Some days I wish it didn't take all of this pain to realize it but my life isn't just something to escape from. I can be present now.

And I'm finally home, SoCal has always been home.