

Every Road



Photo by Author

“These dry years you hear some people complaining, you know, about the dust and the wind, and how dry it is. But the wind and the dust, they are part of life too, like the sun and the sky.” - from Ceremony by Leslie Marmon Silko

The road to my parents' house runs for 11 dusty miles. It is a straight arterial connector that narrows from six to four to two lanes as it crawls north from the highway, passing suburban development after suburban development. Craggy desert mountains loom, their faces dipped in cloudy shadows. Saguaro and mesquite dot the shoulders of the road. Every mile or so a stoplight punctuates traffic, directing drivers down perpendicular boulevards running west. It is all very methodical, cookie-cutter desert suburbia; stucco and golf courses and cacti raising their arms in solemn praise.

Sometimes when I am on the road, it feels as if it will never end.

My parents moved to the desert a month after I graduated college. Once I had packed all the clothes and books and mementos of past loves from my dorm into boxes, I hopped on a plane, flew across the country, and proceeded to do it all over again. For four weeks I sorted through elementary school assignments. I threw too-small dresses into Goodwill bags. I wrapped candles and dining plates with newspaper until my hands stained black. Four weeks of neverending rolls of bubble wrap and plastic bins until one day we piled into our cars and proceeded to drive almost 800 miles southeast to a house in the Sonoran desert I would move out of another month later.

Our journey wound us out of the California Bay Area through the flat farmlands of the Central Valley, then across the Mojave desert before hitting Arizona. As we crossed the state line on the final leg of our grand exodus, I couldn't help but notice the void of the desert. Plants were few and far between. The mountains seemed sharp and hard, as if cut with a serrated blade. My parents chose the Sonoran for its comfortable winter climate and convenient lifestyle. But staring at the landscape flying by, I remained unconvinced. It seemed to be a place for ghosts and skeletal creatures, things that could feed on prickly pears and thin palo verdes. Not a world made for the living.

In the months before graduating college, the older, wiser individuals in my life warned me about the pending horrors of adulthood. Time no longer being your own. The difficulty with making friends. *Taxes*. But what none of them mentioned was that, in becoming an Adult-with-a-capital-A, I would face the sudden, startling realization of mortality and age.

After that Arizona summer, once I had flown back to the East Coast and built the Ikea furniture in my new apartment and figured out how to avoid the worst of the rush hour commute, I began to notice how quickly time seems to slip through your fingers when you're on your own. Your parents' hair is turning gray. Your grandparents walk slower than they once did. Your dog is going blind. Day by day, time moves forward, dragging you and everyone you know along in the riptide. You wonder how long you have been moving toward the horizon without knowing it. How long is left before the current pulls someone under?

They say youth provides you with a sense of false invincibility, and I understand it now. Is this what growing up is? The mirage of immortality fading? How, then, does anyone leave their friends, their families behind? How do they move through the world, knowing at some point the tide will win?

At the end of the eleven miles, you face a choice. Drive left, toward the historic mining town housing rodeos and upscale coffee roasteries alike. Or drive right, toward my parents'

neighborhood and the nearby national forest, climbing up, up, up into the hills. You have to turn, one way or another. Every road must end.

Before these crossroads, however, lies a small cemetery, set back from the shoulder. The entrance is marked by two colorful pots. It is so obscure, you would hardly notice it. I wonder who would want to be buried here, in such a tiny, parched lot. The dust, the autumn monsoons, the ghosts of the mining town dancing through the agave. Day after day, year after year. Forever resting beneath the sun.

After starting my full-time job, in an effort to become wiser about my industry, I began to read the Wall Street Journal every day. While I tried to stick to banking and finance articles, it quickly devolved into what was effectively a vaguely-justified doomscroll. Soon enough, news of cruelty and violence I had seen in clips on my phone seeped into my daily mandated reading time. Bombings. Bullets. Conflict after conflict. It all seemed so senseless, yet I couldn't look away.

Then, one day, a community near to my heart was thrust into those same headlines, a shooting ripping into the fabric of their world. I couldn't process it. How was this happening to a place I had called home? What must it be like, for those families who could never hug their loved ones again? I stared out my office window toward the airport, watching the planes lift and fall over the bay. I mentally mapped out the nearest staircases. I opened and closed the news over and over again. Why? Why? Why?

Is this what growing up is? Fear? Long desert roads? Worrying that every time you see your family it will be your last?

"I stare out at the desert, a speck of nothing against its vastness. These rocks, this dirt, it will abide for millennia, while I am but a moment in time that will be over all too soon. The thought is crushing, and I cannot breathe." - from A Sky Beyond the Storm by Sabaa Tahir

Two days before we left California, my mother found a baby house finch in the backyard that had fallen from the rafters. She came into the box-filled house near tears, and I dug a lone Tupperware and some paper towels out of the kitchen. Makeshift cage in hand, she scooped the

little bird off the turf and loosely covered the container with a lid in case it panicked and tried to escape.

We rushed to the wildlife rehabilitation center, my mother driving down the curving coastal backroad as I clutched the Tupperware in my hands. The finch was warm through the plastic, its leg splayed at an unnatural angle. Bile mapped a thin trail from the corner of its beak. Its tiny chest rose and fell. Slow. Faster. It fluttered one wing in sudden shock.

“Stay with me,” I murmured. “Please, stay with me.”

In the desert our neighbors tell stories. Coyotes tracking pets over backyard walls. Javelinas - wild desert pigs - chasing pedestrians down sidewalks. We buy our dog a spike-studded jacket. I check behind the retaining wall every time I let her outside. My brother carries a golf club to pull the trash can up the driveway.

What does it mean to live in a land where we constantly must be vigilant for death? Is it simply the human condition to prepare for monsters around every corner? Isn't that how our ancestors lived, fighting for every meal, dying from floods and forests, plagues and predators?

But I cannot submit to this line of reasoning. How could a child learning how to silently barricade a door be the human condition? How is it natural for a mother to be shot down in cold blood? Aren't we meant to be better than this? Aren't we supposed to live for more?

Late at night during our journey to the desert, we ran into a dust storm driving inland. It was faint at first, just speckles of sand floating through the air. But more and more we began to notice the wind whipping through the palms, dust filling the beams of the headlights. “It looks like snow,” remarked my father.

We reached our hotel and frantically unloaded our belongings from the cars. My lungs felt like they were filling with sand as I ran back and forth trying to move bags through the sliding doors. Eventually we settled in for the evening, but even after showering and crawling into bed, I was convinced I could still smell the dry grit of dirt.

*Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you,
You must travel it for yourself.*

*It is not far; it is within reach,
Perhaps you have been on it since you were born and did not know,
Perhaps it is everywhere on water and on land.*

- From *"Song of Myself"* by Walt Whitman

Several days after the move, about a week after the woman at the wildlife sanctuary bustled the tiny finch out of my hands, we called for an update. She left a voicemail about an hour later. The bird was still hanging in there. It was "bright, alert and reactive," trying to gain weight and heal that small, crooked leg. My mother smiled, hearing the news.

It was alive. It was alive. It was alive.

The first winter after becoming an Adult-with-a-capital-A, I returned to my parents house and hiked in the nearby mountains with my best friend. We climbed the rocky trails, weaving past saguaro and rusted metal basins until we reached a lookout point. Stretching out in front of us was a sea of green, rolling mountains and valleys of the nearby national forest stretching as far as the eye could see.

Beneath the late afternoon sun, my breath caught in my chest. The view was so big, so wild, far more than just sand and rocks. It was like the magic of a New England snowstorm, flakes coating your hair in crystalline white. It was like the blue of the California coast, seagulls diving in the Pacific wind. It was like the first thunderstorm of that previous summer, the desert rain soaking my skirt as I spun, arms outstretched in delight. It was the thing the poets talked about, that beautiful, soul-clenching majesty. How could you ever think about death, in the face of that?

I have driven the eleven miles of the desert road in 100 degree heat and in misting rain. I have seen it in the bright shine of afternoon sun and the dark shadows of night. It still does not feel like home, not exactly. But as I have watched clouds roll over that dry cerulean sky, roses and ambers make shadow puppets of the distant mountains as the sun falls, I have begun to see the beauty amidst the desolation. There is something to be said for the shape of the earth, the way the roadrunners and cacti alike thrive in the face of drought and death. It is admirable, that quiet resistance. As I drive down those miles and miles of asphalt I try to feel, for a moment, the wonder of it all.

Perhaps this is what growing up is. The sun on your face. Dancing in the rain. The road stretching ahead and believing there is life and you are alive, you are alive, you are alive.