

Garden of Allah

by Sian Barbara Allen

(after Joan Didion) (after Charles Dickens)

The car is guttering and at first I do not hear him clearly. The antenna is broken and the wipers are loud. he comes in better when I'm off the freeway.

“We must forget about material things.”

It is an old voice that has learned English.

“Thought has not helped us. We must find something else to take the place of thought.”

There is a long pause and I think I've lost him but he comes back.

“And what could take the place of thinking? What human emotion could take the place of thought? I don't know if this is clear to you.”

“I think it's clear,” I say to the radio.

“And what is love?”

“I don't know,” I say.

And he's gone.

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When I first came to Los Angeles, I was eighteen, and it was September, and I got off the plane at LAX, and I had a softsided denim suitcase that I still use. I got on the bus the school said to take and I opened the window and inhaled California. I felt a

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largesse of air and it is this largesse that I feel still, even in the smog and the traffic and the sense of doom that hoods Los Angeles, thirty years later. I loved the anonymity. I had come into the West and nobody knew me and I was free.

I am driving West on La Cienega thinking of places that aren't here anymore. The bank building is gone where the Garden of Allah used to be. A friend and I searched it out twenty years ago and even though it had become a bank building, the bank had put up a little sign — the site of The Garden of Allah. On the Stocker off-ramp I watch a storm coming in from the west. The sky shifts in amethyst, and the hills fade green and goldhammered and the light beams toward the sea. In Los Angeles we lie on the coast of a sea we have forgotten. I love the city and its forgetfulness.

Rain everywhere. Rain on 5th, in the line-up at the Jordan Mission; rain on Mulholland, where it runs down state-of-the-art gutters, and diamonds the umbrellas. Rain on Palm Springs desert, rain on the Hollywood Hills. Rain seeping into the cardboard cartons under the freeway; rain leaking from walls and rending the wallpapered ceilings of small dreams; rain lying pooled in the mud and rusting the new paint of old cars. Rain on the hair and clothes of aunts and mothers thinking of the sons and daughters who disappeared; rain on the decorators trotting by the women, going to the flower market; rain in the shoes of a child who stands quietly. People on the streets looking straight up as if they asked a blessing, with wet eyes, as if the rain were a warm thing, a grey salty batter coming into their mouths.

Street lights jumping through the rain in staggered markers on the streets, much as the brightness may, from the flooded streets, shine bright as the Grail as it seems to flick and light the shelters. Most of the men using newspaper to keep it off — as the rain seems to know, for it has a feverish cold wet.

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I went to the old library on Fowler Street to read books about Lost Angeles. An actress named Peg Entwistle killed herself by jumping off the Hollywood Sign because she couldn't get work.

I think of Peg Entwistle. I wonder about her last day — her choice of clothes, the clamor in her mind, the climb up. The Hollywood hills are covered with flowers now: wild mustard, purple and white verbena, pale yellow acacia, sweet alyssum. It has been windy and the tall palms writhe in the air like lovers come together for the first time.

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