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Writing Methodologies

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Sierra View

They bulldozed Sierra View Golf Course. I understand they put in houses, neighborhoods of stucco tract houses with cement tile roofs and tiny, rectangular yards divided by redwood fences to keep the neighbor's prying eyes from peeking through the windows, typical California houses with perhaps a pale, crystal-blue swimming pool in each backyard. I haven't been there to see the neighborhoods. I'm sure they're lovely, they always are, and I'm sure the Sierras can still be viewed; they can be viewed from almost anywhere in the San Joaquin Valley. Magnificent mountains, the Sierra Nevada, a four-hundred-mile-long gash of jagged rock and exposed granite, up to fourteen thousand feet high, that jut out of the flattest valley imaginable. You can see the curve of the earth across the valley, hundreds of miles of agricultural valley floor, laser-level. The Sierras loom in the background, a vista of a different world: perfect snowcapped black-and-white mountains immanent above a green and growing teeming landscape.

The valley floor used to flood each spring from the Sierra Nevada snowmelt. Thirty feet of snowpack trickled into raging mountain rivers and formed the largest freshwater lake west of the Mississippi—Lake Tulare, or Laguna de Tache as the Spaniards called it—thirteen thousand square miles of clear-melt lake that would simmer in the summer sun until it steamed itself into swamp by late August, a cycle that had repeated since the Pleistocene era. For centuries, the Yokut people from the Tachi tribe formed villages of up to seventy thousand people (an

astounding population density) and fished the lake in reed boats and collected freshwater crabs and western pond turtles from the marsh. The cycle of flooding continued until the 1950s when the Army Corps of Engineers dammed the final Sierra Nevada river flowing into the San Joaquin Valley and turned the valley into the richest farmland in the world. When my parents dug a hole in their backyard to put in a swimming pool, the dirt was rich, black-as-tar sedimentary topsoil all the way down, full of the smell of earth and life, a million years of sedimentation from glacial melt and prehistoric swamp humus scooped out with a backhoe.

I learned to play golf at Sierra View. On Saturday afternoons, my father took me out to play nine holes for six dollars after 4pm. The course was flat and hard-baked, mostly empty late in the day, and the fairways, half grass and half dirt, spread sparse and tan like the coat of a kennel dog with mange. The greens were greenish, green-like, not really green with dead brown spots and crabgrass, big dirt patches, crispy from the sun, always diseased, bumpy and slow like Velcro. The pro shop was a house trailer up on blocks, the restroom an outhouse. It was the kind of course where guys loaded ice chests with beer in the back of golf carts and played shirtless, sometimes barefoot, sometimes in jeans: lots of sweating, swearing, music playing tinnily from inside carts, an occasional wooden knock as a golf ball banged off a eucalyptus tree. And always the yell of “Fore!”

When my dad first gave me a golf club, he set the grip in my hand, and said, “This is how you grip a golf club.” Of the many options—the Vardon grip, the reverse overlap, the ten-finger grip—my father believed in the interlocking grip, where the pinky and index finger wrap around each other to stay locked and secure. I say he believed because choosing a grip is an act of faith, a devotion, like a sacrament, a prayer you say before each swing. The grip founds the golf swing, and all the swing mechanics spring from the grip; it is the alpha and omega. I haven’t played in

years, but my hands still curl into place at the thought, thumbs pointing down an imaginary shaft. How many swings in my life, how many times did I take that grip? And always, I remembered, hold the club softly like you're holding a bird in your hands, gently, so it doesn't get away.

As a teenager I spent countless hours pounding balls at Sierra View, grooving an unmanageable swing on the unimaginable driving range, feeling the sting of every impact as the club drove into the cement-hard ground, the hardpan, watching balls arc and curve, carving into the Sierra vista. I played four balls-a-hole when the course wasn't busy. Jenny in the pro shop would give me free range tokens sometimes.

On windy winter days I could drive the four hundred yard par-fours that played downwind, and I learned to play knockdown shots going into-the-wind, stingers, to take the spin off, so the ball wouldn't balloon up and almost come back like the dead eucalyptus leaves that blew in my face. I learned to cut the ball and hit draws, snap hook around corners and spin balls back on the green. I learned how to chunk buried lies out of the bunkers by hooding the clubface and how to flop shots with opened wedges that faced the sky. I bent the tips of all my shafts from repeated collisions with the unforgiving turf, and the faces of my wedges were worn glassy-smooth and grooveless from hitting sand shots. I can still feel it all in my hands, in my grip, a million shots, an invocation.

I never made it as a pro. For years, I slumped around the mini-tours, and I had friends that did the same, all of us dreaming of the million dollar paydays that were headed our way, the PGA tournaments on emerald-green golf courses. Joe Acosta made it. He was there, for a time, on the PGA Tour. Joe came from Sierra View and became the youngest player to earn his PGA Tour card the year before Tiger Woods turned pro. He was twenty-one. One day in a tournament, with his back against a tree, punching out hard, Joe's club head dug into a tree root buried in the

dirt, something popped in his wrist, and nothing was ever the same. But I guess that's true for everything. Nothing stays the same, not the dream, the course, not the Valley, not even the Sierras and their crown of permanence.

In 1921, Big Agriculture came to the Valley and changed the social, economic, and environmental landscape. JG Boswell, the man who would become known as the cotton king of California, bought land in the flood plains of Corcoran on the edge of Lake Tulare and planted his first rows of California Pima cotton. Over years, he drained and tamed the wetlands around Lake Tulare, digging dikes and ditches and earthen dams and rerouting floodwaters through canals. He bought up neighboring farms when they flooded, and by the end of his life in 1952, Boswell owned one hundred thirty-five thousand acres of cultivated farmland and had successfully lobbied Congress to dam all the rivers flowing into the San Joaquin Valley to keep his land from flooding. Cotton boomed, and Lake Tulare, the largest freshwater lake west of the Mississippi, ceased to exist. A new cycle for the Valley began: ploughed fields, a gas station, strip malls and ranch houses in cul-de-sac neighborhoods, recreational dammed lakes in the foothills, and a golf course.

I thought of Boswell a few years ago on my way through the Valley near Stratford driving to visit my parents in Tulare County. I drove through enormous fields of unpicked cotton that spread on either side of the road extending to the horizons—dry, brown, infinite fields, everything brown but the Pima cotton blooms. Ahead of me a great whirlwind cycled across the road gathering up cotton into a surging white mass, a cotton storm, a cyclonic cloud, and I hit it, an impact of wind that shook my truck. The air around me became thick and blizzard-white as cotton bolls, stripped from their stalks, swirled up in the air and hung stasis-like, floating, a

whiteout, soft and silent slipping across my windshield dreamlike in a slow-motion summer snowstorm like a snow globe world with a Sierra view.

The cotton market had collapsed. The price of cotton had fallen below the cost of picking, so the fields sat fallow and unpicked, suspended. Everything would become an offering to the wind.