Driving to the LAX Airport, I Remember

I saw my first sunrise while driving through Arizona, looking out a dirtied window specked with bugs and windshield cleaner that spayed back in the wind. I think I was 11, and we were moving to California from Texas. I remember feeling ripped apart, a weird devastation mixed with gratefulness. There are so many moments that bring me to my knees—crying out. Watching the sun rise, I felt that my life was moving forward, and that my inner world was trying to hang back. I felt infinitely small and significant and meaningful and powerless all at once. I felt a thousand memories slamming into me, and the knowledge that there will be so many more to form. There are stretch marks, signs of the growing pains it took to grapple with this movement.

Driving Adam to the LAX airport, I felt like I was watching a thousand suns rising through car windows. I suddenly remembered that feeling of movement, the emotions woven through space and environment. How actual dawns seemed to press themselves upon me. How these awakenings were stretching and shattering my inner worlds. We were driving past all of the chain restaurants spattered across Los Angeles, the one or two Asian fusion restaurants that made me feel cool as a teenager, my high school. There was the Civic Arts Plaza, where I smoked pink cigarettes with my best friends and talked about trashy pop music and bulimia. There’s the Whole Foods we’d sneak to during school hours to eat salted caramel gelato, and dream about a co-ed school system. With my sweaty palms now pressed against the leather interior of Adam’s car, a silver boxy car I called “The Toaster,” I scanned the areas of my adolescence and reflected on how out of touch I was. And how I’ll never get that comfortability
back. There will never be another moment when I can passively engage with the world, and those around me.

I wouldn’t consider these thoughts nostalgic. I’ve been reading Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, in which the concept of memory attached to places and communities is constantly addressed and evaluated. For the drive up, I questioned my own roots—these cracked origins planted in a city that has never felt much like home, and how the only thing that ever has was in this car with me right then, about to leave for the Peace Corps in Indonesia. I looked down. Adam was holding my hand, humming along to an instrumental track, making up his own lyrics. I didn’t really believe that your history could wrap itself up into another person, that sharing stories and scars and growing pains could cause the most immense love for someone else, and the inevitable heartbreak that comes with being a human.

Nostalgia and memories and rememories and homesickness. All tied up, all woven in this hand holding mine. When I was in high school, my Calculus teacher advised my all-female class to never establish your identity in a man, never let them hold power. Keep a separate, hidden bank account. Keep your last name. Was I failing all women, loving this person so much, depending on him? Loving the person I am with him, and how I’ve grown? Milan Kundera also approaches these subjects, memory and nostalgia and the search for home in people and places. And while speeding towards Los Angeles that morning, I could only think of the books and stories and characters that have experienced these feelings, and felt the overwhelming emptiness at realizing that life is far more complicated than printed words, or advice from a Calculus teacher. That men can and can’t be trusted, that your identity can be secured and broken by a single person. That I could write poetry and read great literature and study all I want, but to truly
feel compassion and engage with a very broken world and society, to grapple with privilege and power and responsibility, I had to keep driving and keep holding each hand of each person in my life.

Adam lived in his car last year, his final year in college. He gave his paychecks to his mother to pay off her medical bills, her tens of thousands of debt due to Lyme disease. She herself lived in low-income housing, her ex-husband in Dubai teaching English and eating $200 steaks each meal, where he couldn’t yell or hit or rape her anymore. For an entire year, Adam drove “The Toaster” up to Gibraltar to sleep, where the police wouldn’t knock on his window and he could watch the sun rise over the water tower, over all of Santa Barbara. For the duration of Peace Corps, Adam is giving me his car, his old home. How many sunrises will I see through these windows, Adam’s home windows? How many memories of his will now be mine, interwoven through my life and experiences?

It’s easy to abstract emotions this way. The harder thing to do is inhale the cinnamon scent of Adam’s hair, to laugh at the coffee stain on the floor rather than cry, to squeeze his hand harder rather than worry about the times when you can’t. That’s another thing that scares me the most—Adam is entering a world full of intention, purpose, and cruelty. He’s throwing himself into a new world, a whole new culture, a new language, a new appreciation for running water and phone-calls.

And I’ll still be here, reading books where people are living hard lives, or living boring lives, or experiencing emotions with which I can understand. I’ll be writing short stories that maybe will mean something to at least someone, and that someone will not be Adam. I’ll be
tracking college units and finally completing assignments. I’ll be here, worrying and homesick and lonely and fulfilled and completely alright but an absolute mess with all of these abstract thoughts, with all of this movement and old memories. Each time I enter my room, I’ll encounter memories of Adam staying up all night to while I cried about my sister’s hallucinations, when he rubbed my back and let me vomit even though it hurt both of us. Or the floor where we had sat so many nights, drinking mimosas and watching Scrubs, talking about how families are everything and nothing all at once, that this entire human experience is full of paradoxes. The scattered pages of poems all influenced by him. The countless hours driving through San Luis Obispo, where we’d listen to music from when we were younger and oddly more confused and sad, and talk about purpose. Adam will be there, in Indonesia, creating new origins and ties to a place and to a people I’ll hear about through email. And I will be here, driving his old home across Santa Barbara, trying to see the sunrise through our windows.