

RUCHIKA TOMAR

Letters to a Panther

If everything happens for a reason there are many reasons you happened. There are the us-reasons. There are the me-reasons and there are the you-reasons. There's the California reason. California is home, different parts of it. I've felt like California is a marshmallow, essential, but unnecessary. California is soft. Tasty. It melts on a cedar twig under extreme heat. The times I was going to see you were the times I drove it. Those were the times I wanted to explore. Sometimes I would see you. Sometimes I would see my daddy. How apt is that?

Clearing the Los Angeles line is my favorite part, and the open tar on the 405 in early morning, the cars whizzing by thirty-five miles too fast. The palm trees, so green, the sun, so hot, the people, all of us stopping for coffee and gas. The golden-brown tans and string bikinis. The breasts. The pink velour tracksuits and cellphones. Happy or something like it. Now where did I put my soul? All those polished, gleaming fingernails, tapping away.

Get back into the car. The tiny strip of intermediate road is filling up with the long distance truckers. They're looking over their shoulders trying not to squash the little people in their little cars. I always give them their berth. I want to drive the highways, not become a highway pancake.

When the road changes from palm trees to little pebbly gravel, the sky opens. Go on a little further and you'll see the tumbleweeds. Real ones, yeah. There are real things here, even in California.

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The car climbs the Cajon overpass. Groans over it. I pray it does not overheat. You can stop where the signs say gas, everyone else does. Load up on a giant soda and some peanuts and some M&Ms and some gum and some licorice and some hats. Big, straw hats. Just one. Why not?

There's a couple getting out of an Escalade at the gas stop. She's way too young for him. He holds her hand. They've probably had sex in that car. She has hips and a bottom and long dark hair and looks with eyes that say, Don't judge me. I'm having fun. Life is one big party. Pass the blow.

Get back in the car and drive, drive. Do you smell the cows? The horses? Who knew there were still cows somewhere in California, where strip malls haven't found them yet? Where people haven't laid down their lives in square, track homes?

The I-5 splits. I take it this way, right, on to San Francisco. Go through the Grapevine; see the aqueduct with water so blue. Keep going even though the cars are tired now. Get back on real black freeway at last. More lanes, more cars. I pass Livermore, Pleasanton- yes, here, wave to Daddy, wave here from the car. Pass the exits for Danville, San Ramon, and Blackhawk. The places and lives I used to live.

Through green hills, through Oakland, no, don't take it that way, not to Berkeley. The Berkeley that smells like Nam Champa incense and books and sandwiches with alfalfa sprouts and everything that is right with the world. There's the toll road. There's the bridge. That's what I take. I can barely sit still. It's beautiful now, open, dark. It's been a long day.

Inch the car along the bridge and see water water water everywhere. There's the sky and there's the world. The cars, excited on their horns, leaning, skittering left and right over the dotted lines, vibrating to get there get there get there. There's clam chowder there. It's the Promised Land. It's where I lost myself. It's where I found you.

