

MARTA MARETICH

# Landfill

## Burying my family's history in Bakersfield

“Please go away,” the handwritten sign says. “It’s not worth getting a bullet in your ass.” The sign is taped to the wall in the kitchen of the house my family abandoned in Bakersfield.

“I guess they couldn’t read,” my neighbor Mario says and laughs nervously. The house has become a magnet for criminals, a mid-century, ranch-style fortress to be defended by Mario. “Right here’s where I shot through the door.”

He points to a spot on the wall of the front hallway where a spray of buckshot scored the white plaster. The front door itself has been replaced—Mario installed a new one with the same care he’s looked after everything since my father moved away four years ago. He walks me around the side of the house and shows me the old door, leaning up against the side of the garage. The burglars drilled a circular hole around the deadbolt then jimmed the latch with a crowbar. Mario surprised them on the way out and shot at them with both barrels of his shotgun, tearing a ragged hole in the wood at chest-height.

Examining the wreckage, I stand with my neighbor in the weak spring sunshine. It strikes me with a sense of old shame that my family is very bad at cleaning up our own messes.

“What happened to the burglars?” I ask Mario.

Neither of the criminals was badly hurt, he tells me. One “took a little shot” and was arrested. The other got away, running down the street without his shoes. The one they caught got seven years because he had priors. Nothing happened to Mario.

“The police said it was too bad I didn’t kill them,” he says.

I am thinking of all the things inside the house—forty years of my parents’ lives—but then again, not quite that. My mother moved out in the mid-nineties, taking the things she cared about—the art and the antiques she bought with her own money.

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*BOOM: The Journal of California*, Vol. 4, Number 4, pps 26–36, ISSN 2153-8018, electronic ISSN 2153-764X. © 2014 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Rights and Permissions website, <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintInfo.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/boom.2014.4.4.26.



My father lived there alone until his deteriorating health forced him to move to Oregon to be near my brother. When he left, he took almost nothing with him because he had never cared about houses or their contents. He always said he'd like to live in a tiled room with a drain in the middle to hose it down.

"Is the dump still in the same place?" I ask Mario. I am due back at home in London in two weeks. By that time, the place has to be empty.

"Are you talking about the landfill?" he says.

This change in nomenclature jars me more than it should. When I was planning this trip, I reassured myself that at least I still knew where the dump was. At least I had a starting place for a task I had no idea how I would complete.

Mario sees my face and says immediately, "I'll help you. Don't you worry about a thing. We'll use my truck."

The cabs of pickup trucks are confessional spaces.

My mission is obvious to everybody I meet on this trip to Bakersfield. People come out of the woodwork to help me,

bringing their pickups and their stories. They know my story, so I am free to listen as we go to and from the landfill.

Mario has a '58 Chevy pickup he's owned since high school. It's metallic blue with the pleasing roundness of trucks from this era, more like a shell than a machine. He rebuilt it himself using parts from the scrap heap when he returned from service in the Vietnam War. "It's a Frankenstein truck," he says.

The interior has no seatbelts, but it has a Virgin on the dashboard and a rosary hanging from the rearview. "*Sin cinturón, pero con santa,*" is my weak joke, one I immediately regret making since I am not a Catholic. Like everything in Mario's house and garden, the truck is immaculate and runs well.

We pack the bed with the first load: huge black plastic bags full of translucent sheets and rotten food from the kitchen cupboards. My father had walked out leaving everything as it was. We cover the load with a crackling blue tarp, which Mario explains is now a requirement. I feel outraged by this news, more than I should. Covering your load? Despite years of living in European cities and seeing the need for all kinds of civilizing regulations, I am still a Bakersfield girl at heart. I still have a surly reaction when I think some official is telling me what to do.

Instead of going down the main street and turning straight onto Edison Highway, Mario takes a back route which threads through the neighborhoods south of College Avenue. This route, which I will take many more times over the course of the next two weeks, reminds me that our house and Mario's are set on an important Bakersfield fault line: above College Avenue the neighborhood is prosperous, even rich. The country club is up there, one of the good high schools, the big houses. There is even a house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. As if metaphorically, the land slopes upward, leading to better things.

South of College, the slope is distinctly downward. Mario angles the truck through gridded streets of tiny, pimpled stucco houses with penned-in yards, dirt driveways, drifting children, and stray dogs. Eventually, we cross the train tracks and turn east on Edison Highway, heading in the direction of the Tehachapi Mountains. The road runs between vast citrus fields, past the fruit packing sheds with names I know. They look run-down, with their open weighing floors and conveyor belts standing idle. It strikes me that they haven't changed at all since I was a teenager. Neither has

the labor force in the fields. Out in the orchards, I see groups of pickers at work filling crates with orange-green fruit.

"Picking time," Mario says. "Glad I'm not doing that today."

That surprises me for some reason. I've never really considered Mario's past, possibly because I met him when I was a child, before I understood that people have pasts. I was twelve when he and his wife, Gracia, and their two children moved in next door, taking over the house from a family of Basque sheep herders.

Mario was a mailman, and in all my early memories of him, he's dressed in the white pith helmet, sharp blue-gray shorts and short-sleeved shirt of his uniform. I know from my dad that Mario is also a Vietnam veteran. He is very active in Marine Corps veterans' groups, and he tried hard to involve my father, a veteran of World War II, but with no success.

As we drive, he points out particular fields that he and his family harvested. They came up from Texas originally, first to pick San Joaquin Valley fruit and later to settle. He tells me how he and his five siblings would attend school in the winter and then spend the summer traveling up and down the Valley with their parents, living in camps. They'd go where the work was, up to Fresno, Marysville, or as far as Oregon. It was all families, he tells me, with parents and children of all ages. Even the tiny ones pitched in.

Mario is a fifth-generation American, yet he speaks with a clipped, upward-tending accent that has its roots on the other side of the Mexican border. "Mexican," in Bakersfield, when I was growing up there, was a purely pejorative term, so much so that even today I can hardly bring myself to use this adjective. I still hear it hissed through the teeth of white people: "*Messican.*"

I look more carefully at the pickers in the field. Like the packing sheds, they don't seem to have changed at all. They're wearing what they have always worn: padded, Pendleton plaid shirts over hooded sweatshirts, hoods pulled up to protect their heads, baseball caps on top of that. They're a familiar sight to me, but I'd forgotten about them, or maybe I believed that agriculture had moved on in the San Joaquin Valley and there would no longer be any need for them. I almost never see a human being bent double in the fields of England, Germany, Spain, or France. It's true that some Poles, Romanians, and Roma people still follow the fruit harvest, but in dwindling numbers.



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I asked Mario when he stopped picking.

“When I went into the Marine Corps, after high school.”

Mario doesn't go into detail about his time in Vietnam, not then or at any point during the two weeks he spends helping me clear the house. We work side by side for days at a time—he won't hear of letting me do this hard job alone. He looked after my father when he was on his own, treating him like a comrade, a platoon mate, bringing him plates of food for every holiday. Now, for my father's sake, he's looking after me. He poisoned the rats in the garage before I even knew they were there. He gassed the black widow spiders. His daily help makes what I am doing possible. He's demonstrating to me the meaning of *Semper Fi*. Although we talk about a lot of other things, Vietnam is not the conversation Mario will have with someone he still thinks of as a child.

I know the story, though, because he told it to my husband who was also a soldier when he was young. Mario returned from Vietnam wounded, doused with Agent Orange, jungle sick, and decorated with the Congressional Medal of Honor. He also brought back a bad case of post-traumatic stress disorder. This he does talk about with me because it bears on our situation.

On the way to the landfill, he tells me about his PTSD support group and the counseling he gives to other veterans. He talks eagerly, energetically, like a man describing a beloved hobby or a precious collection. No note of complaint or blame or regret ever creeps into his voice. He is a patriot in the classic mold, with no sense of having been wronged by the US military or being let down by society. As he talks, I begin to feel that he's trying to make me understand something I may have missed. When I hear him say the burglary put him right back in the theater of war with a gun in his hand and an enemy in front of him, I finally understand: Mario is telling me how close we all came to disaster.

“It was a good thing I only had those two shells with me!” he says.

We are turning onto the frontage road that leads to the landfill. The road curves around a hillside lined with more citrus groves and an old stand of eucalyptus trees. Mario is joking, but now I know what he already knows: if he had had more ammunition, he would have continued shooting until both the burglars were dead.

Gracia, his wife, later told me privately how she had gone out to him after the incident and taken the shotgun out of

his hand and hid it where he couldn't find it. He sat on the steps of our house, she said, shaking, waiting for the police to come, saying he should have done more, saying he should have finished the job.

A friend of mine who lives out of town mobilizes her sister, Laura, who comes down from her ranch in Tehachapi eager to help. She has fine, sun-bleached blonde hair, bright blue, round eyes, and darkly tanned skin. Laura has spent her life crisscrossing the valley floor in her truck, driving between ranches and farms and processing operations, striding around fields and orchards and feedlots. She's an inspector for the California Department of Food and Agriculture. Her truck is midnight blue and serious.

We fill the bed with things from the garage, and I watch Laura sheet it down with a practiced hand, crossing the cord over the top of the tarp, tucking the edges down around the load like a woman making a bed, before finally securing the cord with hooks hidden at points inside the bed of the truck. We climb up into the cab.

Like Mario, Laura avoids the main route and steers the truck through the neighborhood south of College. Her family used to have a house down there, before they moved up the hill, much higher than us, into a perfect fifties' jewel of a split-level ranch house, the kind of house Rock Hudson might have lived in with Doris Day. My parents' house is uninhabitable after the break in, so I'm staying there now, with Laura's parents, in a little guesthouse behind the main house. The family calls it La Casita.

I don't know Laura that well and feel a little awkward in the privacy of the cab with her. She's several years older than my friend, her sister, and wasn't around much when we were young. She went off the rails as a teenager and ended up involved in drugs, living an unimaginable life on the coast in Cayucos. Once, she sold her sister's horse for drug money, a crime I always thought was the lowest thing I had ever heard of.

Laura turned her life around. She had a child and, with help from her parents, she straightened herself out. Her son is now in his twenties and working as a bomb disposal engineer for the Army. He was living in La Casita until he shipped out to the Gulf. I sleep on the memory foam mattress he bought with the proceeds of his previous job as a bartender in a strip club beside Highway 99.

Laura is a great source of information about everything we see on the way to the landfill and about the landfill itself.



She explains the activity we see in the orchards. Every grower wants to get that first, lucrative crop of oranges to the market as soon as possible, she explains, and it's her job to check that the sugar content and acidity levels are right. If they're not, the grower has to send the whole pick to juice, or just throw it away, since a bad crop "sours the market."

I'm amazed at the level of state oversight that goes into oranges. I ask more questions and learn that Laura does a lot of other things, too, from regulating the quality of produce at farmers markets to monitoring the work of slaughterhouses and feedlots in the area. She is knowledgeable about all the agriculture issues of our time: genetically modified crops, migrant labor, sustainability, government subsidies, and the role of huge multinational corporations. Her work puts her in the middle of the Valley's business, and she likes it.

As she talks, she begins to remind me of her sister, whom I may not get to see on this trip. The tiny fragment of my heart that has never forgiven Laura for the stolen horse slowly gives way to admiration for her.

The changes in the landfill are a measure of how much Bakersfield has moved on—and how much it hasn't. When I was growing up there in the 1970s, the dump was a series of open heaps at the bottom of the bluffs beside the dry bed of the Kern River. Using it was a simple proposition: you drove up, you shoved whatever it was you didn't want off the bed of your pickup, and you drove away. There was no charge, no sorting, no regulation that I can remember. Going there felt transgressive, so it was always a treat.

If the packing sheds along Edison Highway are the same as ever, the dump is so radically different now that, once I've actually seen it, I can no longer continue to call it "the

dump,” which I have stubbornly been insisting on doing because “landfill” seems so euphemistic.

We get a view of the lifecycle of the landfill as we come around the bend. On our right, we pass parts that have already been filled and covered over with a thin skin of valley soil. They form small, soft mountains much like the brown foothills that were here before the landfill arrived. Laura, as knowledgeable about this as she is about everything else, points out the telltale black standpipes and segmented conduits that capture the methane produced by the rotting waste and channel it into underground tanks.

I wonder at the size of these false mountains. This landfill has only been operating since 1992 and already it’s created its own garbage *sierra*. Its scale testifies to an exploding local population of waste producers: between 1990 and 2013, Bakersfield’s population increased by nearly fifty percent, and it continues to be one of the fastest-growing cities in the country. The far-sighted planners have engineered the landfill to take it. The site currently occupies 650 acres, Laura tells me, but it has capacity to expand to 2285 acres to meet the Valley’s escalating need to dump.

There are booths at the entrance where attentive officials in the dusty brown uniforms of California state employees step out and check our load and ask us pointed questions about where it comes from. Once we’ve passed their scrutiny, it’s still a long drive to the active face of the landfill. The unpaved road curves around the hillside with a long view back to the valley floor. Laura’s truck has the suspension of a trampoline, and we shimmy and glide over ruts caused by city garbage trucks and commercial haulers. We are dumping with the big boys now. On our right, we pass a recycling area where there are different heaps for different materials: plastic (colorful), tires (black), appliances (cubic), garden waste (bushy), and metal (spiky).

“Recycling!” I say to Laura. The sight of it pleases me. Maybe it’s because the heaps remind me of one of those baby toys with different, stimulating textures.

“Oh yeah!” she says. “We have to.” I’m not sure whether she means we have to because of state regulation—Laura is crystal clear on regulation—or because there’s a planetary need.

We come around the bend and descend a slope toward a new terrain. Bulldozers have excavated a wide crater between the hills. As we roll into it, we find it already partially filled with a choppy, confetti-colored sea of trash.

A young woman in a high-visibility vest and a hardhat ambles toward us across the crater floor and waves us into a spot beside a commercial truck, which splits in two, tilting its bed to slide a load of unopened boxes full of yogurt drinks onto the heap. Bursting open, they fill the air with the sickly smell of artificial strawberry.

We lower the tailgate of Laura’s truck, unleash the tarp, and start unloading what at home seemed like a shameful amount of rubbish. Here it seems paltry, an embarrassment. The recycling heaps we saw, too, are a joke compared to the epic size of the main landfill. This is not disposal, this is terraforming, not “filling” the land (which doesn’t need filling) but making a new kind of land, a land based on the things we do not want.

Trucks and cars swarm into the crater in a steady flow. They find places near us and disgorge. Some men arrive in a Joad-family-style pickup, its bed extended with uprights and wooden panels, and unload a small, sad houseful of furniture. The bulldozers buzz about, the hosts of this party, organizing our rubbish into new forms. I watch my family’s castoffs becoming part of a future land.

We are 150 miles from the coast, but the landfill is swarming with aggressive seagulls. It’s hard to imagine how the birds found out about this place. Who told them? Thousands wheel and settle on the garbage, keeping up a deafening seaside racket here at the edge of the desert. Every so often a bird-scarer lets rip with a loud explosion and the whole flock takes to the air, white and gray against the cloudless blue sky. I jump every time this happens—it sounds exactly like a rocket launcher to me—and it reminds me of Laura’s son, defusing bombs in the Gulf. If the explosions have the same effect on Laura, she doesn’t mention it.

Larry keeps a loaded revolver on the seat of his truck. It’s in a camouflage holster, a riot of forest green and brown that doesn’t do anything to disguise it against the pale-gray seat covering.

The gun sits there between us as we drive to the landfill. “Larry,” I ask him. “What happens if you get stopped by the police?”

“They don’t say nothin’,” he says, as if he’s already tested this, and smiles. He’s Laura’s dad, and he looks a lot like Laura, with big shiny blue eyes and the sort of white teeth most people have to go to the dentist to buy. He was a pipefitter before he retired, a welder. In my California hippie-punk days, he used to give me his pearl-snap denim



workshirts when they were too full of spark holes to be of use to him. I wore them at UC Berkeley where other California hippie-punks offered to buy them off my back.

Larry shouldn't be helping me. He had thyroid cancer a couple of years ago, and now he has a tumor on his spine, pressing the nerves and causing him leg and back pain. As we drive to the landfill, he is waiting for the results from a biopsy that will tell him if the lump is malignant. He shouldn't be helping me, but he wants to, because he can see I need his help. Today it's old shelves and cardboard box files (my father seemed to collect these) and lengths of pipe that we will take to the scrap metal pile. A lifetime of pitching in and lending a hand, the habits of long workdays that began before dawn to avoid the worst of the valley heat, seem ingrained in Larry. He works like an automaton, never sitting down, only pausing to look around for the next thing

to pick up and heave into the bed of the truck. He drives a big modern rig similar to Laura's but painted a subtle fawn color.

On the way to the dump, we talk a little about what's been happening since I went away. Bakersfield people don't ever talk about just Bakersfield. They don't think of the city separately from the surrounding land, because until recently almost everyone made their living directly from the land. Bakersfield people talk about "the Valley" and they are always moving around in it, inhabiting the whole area, not just the city.

Larry is the best example of this restless inhabiting I can think of. His two passions in life are hunting and golf, and both pastimes lock him to the land. The hunting has taken him into every wild corner of the state and earned him a national record for the points and spread of the antlers



of a buck he bagged. Behind La Casita, like some high-art *assemblage*, lesser sets of deer antlers are heaped in a huge brown trashcan. Larry tells me when he was a kid they used to drive over to the coast at San Simeon and jacklight William Randolph Hearst's zebras.

"Don't you tell anyone about that," he says and winks. Looking out the window across the fields, I wonder about the other things Orson Welles left out of *Citizen Kane*.

But these days Larry doesn't feel like hunting anymore. Every day he puts out seed for the delicious little ringneck doves that moan and flutter around the fruit trees in his backyard. He still loves golf, though, and plays despite the pain in his legs. His golf bag is the identical camouflage of his pistol holster, so it looks like something that could do double duty. "Sometimes it gets lost in the bushes," he teases.

The trouble, he tells me, is that "Koreans are buying up all the courses." At first this sounds far-fetched, maybe a little paranoid, but I quickly realize that it is probably true and not really surprising. A California golf course must seem an attractive investment for a Korean businessman. It's not that Larry minds the owners being Korean. "I mean, *someone's* going to own 'em," he says. It's that they let the fairways turn to dust, the greens scab over, and the clubhouses fall down. To Larry this indicates that the Koreans don't care about them as golf courses. They have some other purpose in mind for the land. He doesn't like this, but he accepts it as inevitable. Two things have always been true about Valley land: one is that someone else, someone rich, owns it. The other is that they have plans for it that don't necessarily include you.

In the second week of my stay, Larry gets the news that his tumor is benign and the mood around the house lightens. He is downright bouncy and even happier to help me haul trash to the landfill, especially on the day I find something sinister in the garage. Packed in a wooden crate, insulated by sawdust, is a gallon of sulfuric acid in a glass jug. I know what it is because there is a little handwritten label on it that says "sulfuric acid." I have no idea what my father could have been doing with this. I don't really want to know. My problem is how to get rid of it. When I ask, people just say to take it to the landfill, but I know that even in Bakersfield that can't be right. It's my husband back in London who comes up with the answer. After a quick internet search, he directs me to the Kern County hazardous waste disposal site.

Larry has never heard of the place. He's intrigued and so is Mario, who comes with us when we drive out to the facility. It's down among the industrial businesses on the east side of Highway 99, an anonymous one story aluminum-clad building surrounded by a wide, asphalt buffer zone. We drive up, and I hop out of the cab, eager to explain why I am bringing them a gallon of sulfuric acid. A man wearing a white hooded jumpsuit stops me and instructs me to get back into the cab. He has a little goatee and looks like a grown-up version of the boys who did environmental sciences at Cal—but his demeanor is as grim and official, as if he were an agent for the FBI. He mobilizes other white-suited workers and carefully they lift the crate of acid from the bed of Larry's pickup while Larry, Mario, and I exchange what's-going-on-here looks. Then the men in white suits just wave us away. There is no paperwork to fill out. They don't take our license number. They don't even look at our faces. We could have handed over the toxic remains of a meth lab or a barrel of nuclear waste, and they wouldn't have blinked an eye. I realize that this is the point of the hazardous waste disposal facility.

As soon as we are alone, my best friend, Kris, pulls up her T-shirt to show me her breasts. "Ta-dah!" she cries. One of them is familiar to me from our youth—we often got dressed to go out in the same room and skinny-dipped together in the same pools. The other one I don't recognize: it has a purple scar running from one side to the other and a nipple that shows signs of being cut out and moved to a new location. Kris pushes down the waistband of her jeans and shows me the other scar. This one bisects the smooth brown skin of her abdomen, side to side. It's the sort of scar a woman might have if the magician sawing her in half took his job too literally.

This bravado is typical of Kris—when we're alone. Showing me saves so much time. We don't have much of it and she has so many things to tell me. When I'm in London, we keep in touch through Facebook. But the things Kris shares with me in private complicate the public posting, the life-affirming snapshot, and for this reason, she asks me not to use her real name when I write about my journey home.

In her posts about her reconstructive surgery, Kris wrote of her "new body" and posed in tight dresses with a big smile, looking beautiful. This was the illusion she wiped away the instant she pulled up her shirt to show me how things really were.



This is what I've always loved about Kris: she won't lie to me. I don't think she's capable of it. The transition may be abrupt. It may be brutal. But she'll tell it like it is. Now she's driven in from out of town to help me, bringing her pickup and more honest pain than I'm prepared for.

Her truck is the biggest and fanciest yet, a professional vehicle, sprayed a classy metallic gray. It has a stretch cab with a full backseat. She and her husband call it the Limo Truck. It is powerful enough to pull a small circus's worth of trailers across the country. We fill the bed with rolls of carpet stripped from the floors of my parents' house. I am getting to the end now, down to the bare bones.

Like all my other drivers, Kris chooses the back way to the landfill. On the way, I point out the yard sales. Every few houses, a couple of ladies sit on folding chairs, knees pointing to opposite points of the compass. On a table are videos,

sometimes a few pieces of dishware, a blender. Children's clothes are displayed on the fences, their sleeves and pant legs threaded through the chain-link diamonds, looking like children pinned there by a strong wind.

These yard sales are not weekend affairs. They are permanent. Most of the stores on this side of town are closed, driven out of business by Walmart and Costco. The malls my mother shopped in are empty shells now, with grass growing through the asphalt of their parking lots. All the supermarkets are gone. On the other side of town, near the I-5, a whole new world of big-box stores is going up. Meanwhile, these ladies are selling the sort of stuff I've been donating to the Salvation Army and the Men's Homeless Mission. "Selling it to whom?" I wonder out loud. Kris shrugs.

Before the breast cancer, there was ovarian cancer. Then came the financial crisis and the business she ran with her

husband started to get into trouble. They had been doing well and had a growing reputation—at one point, they employed twenty people—but when the crash hit, a string of creditors failed to pay them and they were finally forced to declare bankruptcy. Kris tells me her husband just gave up at this point. They'd drive past desolate trailer parks, and he'd say, "Well, we can always live there." For Kris, a born fighter, this attitude was unforgivable.

I thought of Kris's husband, a handsome, gentle, hard-working man I have always thought was a good match for her. Now they are separated, and he is roaming around the West, trying to revive their business. Meanwhile, she works a job that at least brings them healthcare and lets her pay their mortgage. She couldn't bear to lose the house, though it's now underwater, the monthly payments are huge, and there's an \$80,000 balloon payment waiting at the end of the road. She fears her teenage son might be getting into trouble, and her teenage daughter is trying too hard to be *perfect*.

This story unfolds during several rides over two days. We go to the landfill and shove the carpet onto the mountain of garbage. We go to the Goodwill with boxes of things too good for the landfill.

When Kris talks, she cries. I have almost never seen her cry, and when she starts up, I cry too. We drive around, two women in a great big pickup, in tears. It doesn't affect Kris's driving. Even when we were fifteen and I was still backing my dad's El Camino stupidly into lampposts, she knew how to handle machines. But at one point, when she tells me about the trailer park, she's crying so hard I want her to pull over. I want to hug her and explain macroeconomics to her in order to show her that this is not her fault, as she believes it is, and not her husband's fault either. I want to draw her diagrams and show her articles from *The Economist* that will prove to her that they have been caught up in the biggest, almighty economic shitstorm in history and no one could have handled it much better than they did.

Kris won't pull over. The cab is so big I can hardly reach her when I stretch my arm across the space between us. I put my hand on her shoulder, and I keep it there while she drives, not knowing what else to do, how else to show her what I feel. Eventually, she says, "You don't have to do that." I take my hand away.

I can hear the appraiser moving calmly from room to room in the empty house. He trains his laser measure at the bare walls, runs its red beam along the stripped floors. He makes notes on a form.

"The good news is, it's not subsiding," he tells me. He's an old classmate of Larry's. He's been in the real estate business in Bakersfield for five decades and knows everything.

His words worry me. "Did you think it would be subsiding?"

"Lots of these houses down here are," he says. "These were barley fields. They used to plough the barley roots back into the soil, so it tends to be full of air pockets. It compacts down over time and then the houses subside." He pauses. "Not this one, though."

*Barley fields.* I savor this unexpected information about the house I grew up in. It strikes me as poetic. It makes me look at the house in a new light. I can't stop thinking about it as I pack my bags back at La Casita. I mention it when I say my goodbyes to Mario and Gracia.

At the foot of the Grapevine, on my way south to LA to catch a flight back to London, I stop for gas and take one last look across the Valley. I think I can see a haze hanging over the landfill where the trucks are kicking up the dust. Now that landfill contains the remains of my family's life in Bakersfield. I put them there. The bulldozers move over them, shoving our relics into some kind of shape. Later, they'll cover everything in dirt. Eventually, someone will build on top of it, just as we built on top of the barley fields.

All through this trip, I have been telling everyone I've come to "clean out" my parents' house. It sounds virtuous, but in truth I haven't cleaned anything out. I've just shifted our mess from one place to another. It's still a mess. And now I see it is part of an even bigger mess—Bakersfield's, California's, the whole country's. It's not the kind of mess we can bury, no matter how big we make the landfill site. I get back in my rental car with a feeling like shame and a strong desire to confess this to someone. But there is no one there to confess it to. **B**

## Note

All photographs by the author.