

Behind the Hills

By Bradley Beylik

*Who shall gather the smoke of the dead wood burning,
Or behold the flowing years from the Sea returning?
The days have gone down in the West, behind the hills into shadow.*
- J.R.R Tolkien, *Lament for Eorl the Young*

Driving up ash-stained Silverado Canyon Road, three thousand evacuated residents of the Silverado area were making their way home. A week earlier, mandatory fire evacuations had turned them into refugees. Staring blankly out their car windows, they crossed the barricades that had kept them away. They were prepared to assess what had been lost in the fire. The hills that once preserved the look of ranch lands and riparian woodlands, the lost look of a more rural Orange County, were a dusty black. Here and there, short brown sage bushes stuck out of the soot blanket. Their leaves were singed away. Bundles of low, lobe-like cactus were melted like green plastic.

All week, government investigators in navy blue t-shirts with block letters on the back—ATF, FBI, FEMA, OCFA—stood with bent backs, digging and sifting through the ash at the entrance to Silverado Canyon, looking for any clues that might lead to the capture of the arsonists. There were people from the forest service, local cops, and reporters. The officials all milled around, marking things with tape and talking to the reporters. A foreign force had invaded the secluded canyon community.

Flames licked the dark sky. From the view looking east from Signal Peak in Newport Beach, the long north-south canyon called Santiago looked like a rift in the earth, ringed with the lumbering black shapes of the Santa Ana Mountains, spewing the earth's innards skyward. Even the tall landmark of Old Saddleback looked threatened as the flames chewed at the bases of its twin peaks.

Fifty or so residents of Newport Beach and south Irvine had gathered at the end of Ridge Park, the steep, Estate-with-view-lined grade that leads to the top of Signal Peak. Past long, serene rows of gilded-looking oaks and willows illuminated by landscape lights, Ridge Park leads to multimillion-dollar homes crowning the highest point of the coastal mountains that stretch between Newport Beach and San Juan Capistrano. These mountains are called the San Joaquin Hills, and have been home to numerous fires of their own in the past.

It is a weird thing to watch the works of humankind burn. That's what I thought when I was back at home a few hours later. I coughed up some ash in the sink and took off my jacket. My shoes tracked soot onto the carpet. I sat hunched on my couch, a mirror image

of every other Southern Californian that night, staring into television screens glowing orange with the fires.

Old Saddleback—visible from locations throughout the Los Angeles basin, the San Gabriel, San Bernardino, and San Jacinto Mountains, Catalina Island, and the groomed suburbs of Orange County—is made up of the two tallest peaks of the Santa Ana Mountains, part of the Cleveland National Forest. Its shape looms behind all the bustle of overcrowded streets and rampant suburban sprawl like a tired old sentinel. The twin peaks have tortured, weathered sides criss-crossed with firebreaks and truck trails, mostly devoid of trees. The top of Santiago, the taller of the two, is stuck full of antennas and transmitters of all shapes and sizes, a haunting replacement for the foliage that must have covered the mountains in green long ago. On Southern California's foggy days, the dark mass is shrouded in marine layer, seeming strong and ominous in its scarred hide. It conjures Moby Dick—immense and ancient, possessing an existence that is at once brutally simple and mysterious, and decorated with the marks of many encounters with men who have sought it out. The mountains seem to keep watch from their heights above the suburbs, keeping record with their scars of all the doings of humankind that unfold around their feet.

Less visible than the peaks, even to most Orange County residents, is the quiet canyon-and-mountain community that has been at the base of Old Saddleback for over a century. Made up of several canyons—including Silverado, perhaps the most famous—scattered with sleepy little cottages, the community seems to have resisted the tide of overdevelopment and kitsch that has ravaged the rest of once-rural Orange County. In that way, the area represents the last of its kind—a rural stronghold in a sea of apocalyptic change.

The issues are many: environmental degradation, disappearing wildlife populations, encroaching development, and damaged ecosystems and watersheds. And these aren't the only concerns for residents of the canyons. Other difficulties abound: landslides, flash floods, and a special brand of political entanglements. Without input from canyon dwellers, big companies and nearby city governments draw maps for future exploitation of the land. A traffic- and water-bearing tunnel connecting Riverside and Orange Counties has even been proposed to run right through historic Silverado Canyon.

In the face of these struggles, Silverado, though in many ways unchanged since its days as a mining boomtown, is today tragically threatened. But more than that, this disputed landscape represents a deeply American experience of survival and change, determination and loss. The rugged mountains with their shadowy canyons tell stories of weary prospectors, defiant Indians, and determined explorers. For people who spend their lives in the anonymous suburban landscape of Orange County, the canyons and mountains are a source of urban myth and local lore, deeply connected to the fading glory of the American West, and to the contradictory national narrative of frontier living and resource exploitation.

The Indians who first lived in these canyons and mountains found abundance and natural beauty here. It was a place of rolling, foliage-covered hills, shady oaken canyons, chilly, rugged peaks, and ocean breezes. The earth ran wet from the many rivers and streams that connected the mountains to the coast, and in the plain to the north was the great river that burst its banks in the spring, swollen with melted snow from faraway mountainous lands. In the canyons of the people the Spanish called the Juaneno and Luiseno, nature teemed with the fertility and nourishment that was in the waters. For food, local Indians could hunt deer and rabbit in the foothills, or catch the fish that swam in the rivers—small brown bottom-feeders with sucking mouths, or the quick flashes of silver and rainbow that came down from the mountains, or the large dog-faced fish with its firm red flesh, coming yearly from the sea to lay its eggs. Some of the hunters might even make the day's journey to the coast to harvest the glistening abalone covering the shores.

But this idyll was not to last. In 1769, the Spanish military, led by Gaspar de Portola, the conquistador of Southern California, made an epic journey of exploration and conquest, traveling north from Mexico to Monterey along an age-old Indian road that would eventually come to be known as *El Camino Real*, or *The King's Road*. Near the canyons of present-day Orange County, Portola and his men found a gushing freshwater spring at the base of a hill. To this day, the spring is called Portola Springs. Local lore holds that Portola also lost a *trabuco*, an old Spanish pistol with a blunderbuss-style flared barrel, while on an expedition into the mountains up one of the canyons. The long, forested canyon would afterwards be named *Trabuco*. Further north in their journey, the men came out onto the floodplains and camped on the banks of a major river. At this encampment, they felt California's first recorded earthquake.

During the time of Portola's journey, the Spanish were operating missions up and down the coast of California, attempting to control and convert the indigenous population. In November of 1776, four months after the colonies in the east declared independence from Great Britain, Mission San Juan Capistrano was founded in the lands of the Juaneno and Luiseno peoples. The beige walls were constructed out of limestone and sandstone quarried from the canyons' streams and were supported by broad oak and sycamore beams cut from the deep woodlands that fed on the canyons' water supply. So useful were the trees that a craggy, meandering canyon toward the northern end of the mountain range was called *Canyon de la Madera*, or *Timber Canyon*.

The founding of the mission marked the beginning of a bloody period during which Spanish forces suppressed a series of Indian rebellions. But the coming of the Spanish was only the first manifestation of the exploitation that came with the arrival of the white man, and that would come to characterize the region's history. From that time on, the canyons of the Santa Ana Mountains would be a place where conflicting interests would converge, and where California's ethnic and cultural differences would explode into

passionate and violent struggles for the resources that flowed down the slopes and through the canyons.

What is known as the last Indian massacre in Southern California took place in 1831, when a group of highly trained American frontiersmen were hired out of New Mexico by officials in the Spanish pueblo of Santa Ana to track down an elusive band of horse thieves. The thieves, a band of Gabrielino Indians, lived in their hideaway in a secluded fertile valley in the upper reaches of the Santa Ana Mountains. The Americans were trappers and hunters, armed with high-tech rifles and an understanding of the terrain that rivaled that of the Indians. They soon tracked down the thieves. A one-sided battle ensued and the Indians, armed only with bows and arrows and a few old Spanish muskets, were mostly killed. The few survivors escaped into the trees and canyons and disappeared.

Along with many of California's mountain ranges, the Santa Anas became the center of mining attention in the late 1800s. The rumor of silver began to spread throughout the area, and prospectors flocked to the canyons. In 1877, silver ore was discovered in *Canyon de la Madera*. Prospectors began calling the canyon Silverado, after the metal they found there. Within months, a town of thousands sprang up, and by 1879, the township of Silverado was established. At its peak, the mining town of Silverado ran a twice-daily coach to Los Angeles and a three times daily coach to Santa Ana. A post office was built—in the American West, a sign that a place had a spot on the national map. All the necessary jobs to support the mining industry followed; blacksmiths, general stores, furniture builders, brothels and the usual disproportionate array of tough saloons filled the forested dirt streets. Shortly after Silverado, coal added to the mining boom, and neighboring Black Star Canyon began to fill up in similar fashion, forming the community of Carbondale. The twin towns prospered for almost a decade, but by 1888, the post offices closed, the miners left, and the towns all but disappeared from history.

The end of mining in the region marked the end of an era. In the 1890s, the U.S. government began to survey the area and enact various measures to protect the resources of the Santa Anas, setting aside land that by 1899 would be a part of the new Cleveland National Forest. The mining boom brought massive devastation to the old-growth pine and oak forests that had filled the canyons, which had been cut and sold as firewood or used in the construction of the mining operations. The grizzly bears that once thrived in the mountains had been reduced to a few survivors, which were being hunted down individually and exterminated. Ranchos sat vacant on overgrazed land, having lost their labor force as the Indian population waned. It was as though the resources of the mountains had finally been exhausted. There was nothing left to fight over.

The 2007 Santiago Fire was not Lisa Alvarez's first. Fifteen years earlier, she and her husband, Andrew Tonkovich, fled their Laguna Beach home with flames at their heels.

The Laguna Fire, as it was called, burned a black blotch into the little remaining open space in Orange County's low coastal mountains, the San Joaquin Hills.

But that didn't deter Lisa and Andrew from choosing the home they live in today. It sits high up on the canyon wall in Modjeska Canyon's Olive Hill neighborhood, a group of forty or so homes perched on the steep terrain. Historically regarded as one of the most picturesque examples of canyon living, the Olive Hill neighborhood lies directly above Arden, the fabled home of Polish Shakespearean actress Madame Helena Modjeska. Modjeska came to the canyons in search of a summer retreat. In 1888, she commissioned famed New York architect Stanford White to build the archetypal canyon dwelling in a serene canyon near Silverado. Named Arden after the setting of Shakespeare's "As You Like It," the home and its grounds embody a vision of canyon life as a getaway, a retreat from the stresses of life. The grounds are planted with olive trees, and chosen carefully for the sweeping views offered by their location deep in the canyon. The hill itself rises out of a blanket of thick-trunked old trees planted by the actress over a century ago. The trees fill the bottom of the canyon, feeding off of the dusty creek bed. Across the creek from Arden is the historic Modjeska firehouse, decorated with flowers and a banner honoring the local volunteers.

I head up to Lisa and Andrew's house, turning right at the firehouse and crossing a bridge over the creek. A dirt road rises steeply in front of me, and I glimpse Arden's storybook presence through the olive branches. The house is sprawling and empty with dark windows. It must have looked confectionary and bright in its early years, but now, like many canyon homes that came after it, it sits brooding and mossy in the twilight. At the top of the dirt road, the asymmetrical houses of the Olive Hill neighborhood are indistinguishable, devoid to suburban eyes of addresses, driveways or other identifying marks. The houses are scattered irregularly on a bed of twigs and leaves. As I look around, glancing blankly at the directions I'd printed from Mapquest, I spot a hand-written sign, STOP THE IRAQ WAR, at the base of a stately concrete staircase. Suddenly, I spot Lisa Alvarez waving at me from the bottom of the stairs. She is wearing a white paper face mask and holding a large rake.

The ornate stairs rise fifty or so steps up the hill from where I park my car. They are disconnected from the actual house, which is even further up the hill. The house itself gets newer as we climb some stairs on the left side of it, up the side of the hill, since each level was built at a different time in the house's history. Lisa explains that it is very old. The original, almost century-old cottage forms the bottom level, a little above the imposing concrete stairs. It looks like it was a simple structure originally—probably a single room with a fireplace. The second story was built later, and forms the middle portion of the house. The third and final level includes a spacious contemporary living room with panoramic, illuminating windows, a kitchen and nook, and a long deck that sits on top of the second story.

"And we were the only ones to put an offer on it," says Lisa.

Inside, I examine the view while Lisa searches for Andrew downhill in the bowels of the house. The deck seems to float on a fluffy sea of green and brown treetops, with a

clear view of the sky and mountains that encircle the community. A hot, dry breeze blows thinly down through the canyon, a sign that the dangerous Santa Ana Wind conditions are back. The mountains, beautiful and golden only a week ago, are burned black from the fire, in sharp contrast with the green that surrounds the house. The winds that drove the flames across the hills, burning the hillside just yards away from Olive Hill, now carry harmful soot down into the valleys of suburban South Orange County.

Lisa Alvarez is a writer and a professor of English at Irvine Valley College, a twenty-minute drive or so into the suburbs. Every Thursday night, writers of all kinds from throughout Orange County crowd around a circle of tables for her short fiction workshop. She also directs the annual Squaw Valley Community of Writers at Lake Tahoe. Andrew is a radio host, English professor at UC Irvine, and the editor of the *Santa Monica Review*, a popular Southern California literary journal.

“Lisa is a good fosterer of writers,” Andrew says, looking over at her. She is helping their five-year-old burn a CD on the computer.

“We’re still settling in here, as you can tell,” she says, glancing around the cluttered room. They had returned with the other evacuees just two days earlier. “I think this coffee table was originally a piano bench. I bought it for five dollars.”

She had said on the way in that their living room was sparsely decorated and messy from the fires. They’d gotten rid of their old couches. The one they’re now sitting on was put out by the side of Modjeska’s winding main road with a “for free” sign, so they brought it up to the house a couple of days ago. “It’s actually a pretty nice couch,” Andrew says.

I ask them about the many troubles of living in the canyons.

“Well, it’s true, bad things do happen sometimes,” Lisa answers.

In 2004, a young girl was killed when a boulder crashed through her bedroom as she slept in her room in Silverado Canyon, in the upper floor of the general store where her family lived and worked. In 2000, two couples on a date wandered out into Black Star Canyon at night. Followed by several men, they were all beaten, and the women were gang-raped. Just in the past few months, an as-yet unidentified body was found near the entrance to Modjeska, and the investigation is ongoing.

People still wander up into the canyons, looking for escape, seclusion, and communion with nature. When Andrew and Lisa first moved into their house, they noticed cars full of suburban teenagers making their way up Modjeska with their beer and weed to hike and look at the stars. Mountain-bikers faithfully wear in the many trails that cross the landscape, some of which are paths that date back to the days of the Indians.

Cook’s Corner, the famous biker bar at the oak-forested corner of Live Oak Canyon and Santiago Canyon Road, still attracts a surly, bearded crowd from all over Southern California. On weekend afternoons, they sit on hand-built wooden benches in their leather and tattoos, eating cheeseburgers and drinking beer alongside families from the

nearby Saddleback megachurch. As is the case in other areas of the canyons, Cook's is a place where remnants of old Orange County collide with the new.

Although Modjeska remains rural today, many of its residents drive expensive cars, and when people come home from work they can be seen lining up outside the canyon, finishing up their cell phone conversations before they lose service. Many of what Andrew Tonkovich calls "McMansions," suburban tract homes tragically similar to those in neighboring suburbia, are being built in Modjeska these days.

Lisa explains that the canyons are in some ways a place of contradictions and opposites. She describes the different people that live there as "granolas and militias"—Libertarians and Socialists, writers and hermits—those who look for the close-knit community of the area, and those who flee more developed areas in search of seclusion—opposite extremes.

Lisa and Andrew had barely two weeks to settle in after the fires before Modjeska was evacuated again, this time for the landslides and flash floods that inevitably follow the loss of vegetation caused by the fires.

A year has passed since the fires of 2007 forced the evacuation of Orange County's canyon communities. The Santa Ana winds have parched the hills to a golden brown and plants crackle when they are walked on. It feels as though at any moment, the slightest spark could ignite another disaster. And finally, it does. Again we all watch the smoke on our TV screens. The fires seem even hotter, faster than last year, burning through larger swaths of suburban property. But this time the fires burn elsewhere—Yorba Linda, Brea, Camp Pendleton, Sylmar, Santa Paula, Santa Barbara, San Diego...but the canyons of Orange County are spared.

I leave suburban Irvine and Tustin behind me and make my way through the foothills along Santiago Canyon road. I pass Irvine Lake, the man-made reservoir that sucks water from the canyons' expansive watersheds. From the road, I can see the shapes of fire watchmen, brave locals silhouetted in the sunset, manning their posts on ridges and peaks and in mouths of canyons, scanning the eastern horizon with their binoculars for any sign of smoke or danger. I turn left into Silverado Canyon as the sun sinks behind the hills in my rearview mirror. Driving the winding five miles or so of Silverado Canyon Road, I soon leave behind me the church, the market, and the library. Sprawling ranches with well-kept pastures give way to low, earth-and-stone cottages and wooden cabins that seem to grow out of the rock canyon walls. Through the trees, some of their windows glow with soft light from within. Finally, I come to a gate, a new gate, kept shut to cars because of the fire danger. The gate leads into the Cleveland National Forest. Mossy cottages cluster up against it, and darkness grows in the long shadows beyond it. I leave my car and walk across a dusty turnout. I crawl between the metal bars of the gate and keep walking. Twilight sets in, and the boughs of old oaks turn the soft orange sky to black. Beyond the gate I am enveloped in a tangle of forest. I could keep walking, into

the wild night and the dark shapes of the mountains, but I don't. I stand there in the dark. All around me are the weathered slopes of the Santa Anas rising further into the night.