**A Song of Home for a Heart That's Breaking**

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What I've written below may look like a list of plants.

In my work as a taxonomist, I have been for several months in conversation with one such list. It is a many-layered joy: because the puzzle-piecing nature of taxonomy engages me, because I rejoice generally in the kingdom Plantae, because it's like opening a gift when I recognize a name. The names of plants are dying in our language. I like to speak and write them as a counter spell.

My list is derived from many sources, but its best inclusions come from the catalog of a particular Oakland nursery, East Bay Wilds. I've never set foot there, but I love them. Their species list contains the raw ingredients of a powerful incantation.

When we lived in that oak-blessed region of California’s indented middle, my mother taught me the names of the plants in her garden, and their habits, by caring for them in my presence. We played our separate games in the yard most days. But sometimes I would eavesdrop while she practiced a beautiful language: one of watering and weeding and mulching, and long, mysterious words.

I imprinted on ​*ranunculus*​ and ​*rhododendron*​ long before I could spell them. I learned that snails love to snack on hostas. (I learned sympathy for snails only later.) I found out that pale-hued, round-leafed impatiens disliked our sunshine. My mother coddled these in deep shade below the lace-leaf maple. My aunt planted sun-kissed heaps of the tropically-hued and pointy-leaved versions, native to New Guinea.

My mother also taught me to lift my eyes to the hills. Straightening from her flower beds, she'd stroll to the street and stand respectfully by as the August fog rolled down off golden slopes.

Approaching San Jose airport recently, I caught at my heart as it leapt to leave my mouth, as it wrung itself out shamelessly down my face. Insistently, I patted my partner’s arm until he looked, and urgently, wordlessly, stabbed at the tiny window. ​*My hills!*

My uncle, who walked miles in those hills most mornings, was the first to show me how to leave the garden, to go out and meet the particular flora of our home range. Long before I understood the relationship of plant to place, endemic species and invasive species and how different soils hold water, he took my small self-walking and he gave me names. The colors and scents and textures matched to each still flavor my dreams.

To possess a piece of knowledge bestows the ability to see where it grows wild. Our brains cannot bring to conscious attention everything we sense; we need a key before we can see there is a door. Naming plants was my first key, and it was given me as a gift, below and between the golden hills that cradled my childhood years.

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Last afternoon, my cat companion died. She was old; it had been expected. Still, it was a shock to see her husk: eyes sunk in their sockets and fur in ragged clumps, the muscles gone slack that had held each piece minutely. The pattern that had made her fast-unravelling. For a dozen years, she was my friend, my little owl, my Gwenhwyfar. I will never speak with her again.

Our present times are overfull with heartbreak. It helps to reach out to my community, gathered around town and on the internet, as ordinary and miraculous as a bowl of stars. It also helps me to work, and I’m lucky to do that with good people, who know when to speak their sympathy and when to ask distracting questions about attributes and values.

I had marked out for my work today this list of plants to finish wrestling with. Grief - for Gwen, for our burning world, for the eyes of my soul that cannot close on all the pain - this grief has loosened my self-consciousness of late. So I didn’t stop when I realized I was speaking aloud the genus and species and cultivar names that pleased me. I picked them up and held them, cool and soothing, the way of river rocks beneath a shaded bank. Merely listing was not what I heard myself doing. I was punctuating each encounter.

So, I wrote them down. I stopped and paused and drew out these names the way they shaped themselves to rhythm. And what I have on paper is...a prayer? A poem, a paean, a mourning song. Beautiful words from my mother’s garden, from the woods and hills of my first beloved home. Chanted or whispered or sung, they rise toward the hurt in my heart. They lift the memory of my loved, my lost small friend.

They lift me, in a time of existential confusion and rising tides, just enough to set my feet in the soil that holds me up.

You may share these words, if you like. I do not think their magic is particular to me, or to my loss, or to loss at all. Or to any way to feel about our shifting world.

Speak them, if you have a quiet place. Throw them out and substitute your own beloved ecology. I hope they might bless, in any way at all, whatever pain or love or sorrow or joy you carry and lift you forward.

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Lace-lip fern and leafy reedgrass, lily-of-the-valley.

Leather root, lotus, living stone.

Oceanspray and olive; owl's claws.

Pacific Mist manzanita. Pearly everlasting.

Pink-flowered buckeye, Point Reyes bearberry,

prickly pear and purple moor grass.

Quail bush.

Radiant kinnickkinnick!

Rushrose and Sandhill sage, sapphire ceanothus.

Sea buckthorn and serpentine sedge; sequoia.

Sorrel, snowdrop, slender-footed sedge.

Shatter- berry manza-

nita.

Spearmint, spicebush, southern silktassle.

St. Catherine's lace buckwheat.

Staghorn, stonecrop, strawberry tree,

Sweet pea and sycamore, tarragon and teak.

Thyme and tickseed; tiger lily.

Torrent sedge, twinberry and toyon.

Water lettuce. Wax myrtle, and weeping fig.

Wild ginger, wishbone bush, windflower, wisteria...

Witchhazel, woodfern:

*Wright's buckwheat bastardsage!* Yarrow.

Yew. And

yerba santa.