

An aerial photograph of a forest with trees in various shades of brown and orange, indicating autumn. The trees are densely packed, and the ground is visible in some areas. The overall tone is dark and moody.

PLATE TECTONICS

& Other Underground Theories of Loss

by BK Loren



And what's left us in pieces all these years
Continues. We've come to love it the way
The tortured, in the religion of their pain,
Become their own tormentors and start to think:

How could it be otherwise?

—Joe Bolton

Earthquakes

I lived in a small cabin nestled in a redwood forest above the Pacific Ocean. Every morning, I woke up before dawn and counted my reasons for living: the trees, the scent of the ocean through the redwoods, the refracting light that looked like diamonds on the distant waves, the sound of seals barking at night, my body, the complexity of my body among the billions of bodies together in this world, the way my body could move and my mind could make choices, the way these images and sensations wove themselves into my dreaming, the night air, the morning air, the air.

I recited these reasons like prayers. I hung onto them with all my might precisely because my grasp on them had been weakened. I clung to my reasons for living so I would not, that day, decide to take my own life. But the part of me that believed these reasons for living shrunk to something imperceptible as the day narrowed into working and interacting with colleagues. By the end of every day I was convinced I had outlived every reason I had for living. This was not the romantic depression I had occasionally posed for in earlier days, the depression of an overly philosophical artiste living in an imperfect world. This was different. I didn't choose it; it chose me.

In his essay "The Myth of Sisyphus," Albert Camus says the only serious philosophical question is suicide. But at this point in my life, suicide was not really a question; it did not exist in the realm of ideas. It inhabited my body, my bones, my spirit. It was the only thing that made sense.

Then, one evening, I was lying on the couch, tired from my workday, and a rumbling entered my body like loud music with too much bass. I went to my front door, but couldn't grasp the handle. The door swung open on its own, and I stood in the threshold, watching my truck catapult toward my house. I heard a blast, and then another. The giant redwoods quivered like aspens.

It seemed as if it took me several minutes to comprehend that the earth beneath my feet was shaking, but the Loma Prieta earthquake spanned only fifteen seconds. To this day, I can account for what took place during every one of those seconds. The earth was alive, its body shuddering through the soles of my feet.

My house was damaged, but did not fall down then. It fell two days later, during an aftershock. I was away at the time, and when I returned home, yellow security tape outlined the circumference of the shattered foundation. That night, I slept in a parking lot with other folks whose homes had been destroyed. We gathered around a bonfire and ate food given to us by the local grocer.

I'd been depressed for well over a year when the earthquake hit, and had not been able to summon the time or motivation to seek professional help. The hopelessness and lethargy inhabiting my body made that bleak world seem as if it was the only place available to me, and at the time, it was. But something unnamable happened during the quake. For the first time in years, I felt a small amount of hope, and so I began looking for a therapist.

Each therapist I visited cited the grand display of the earth's power as the cause of my depression—they, too, had experienced the incredible quake. They diagnosed me with PTSD (posttraumatic shock disorder) and other acronyms that tied my depression to the losses the earthquake brought about in my life. But the acronyms did little to help my state of mind, and though I generally respect the process of therapy, talking for an hour a week in an air-conditioned office at that time in my life only magnified the disconnection that was haunting me.

I know now that the earthquake was not the cause of my depression; I was already depressed by the time the earth rattled beneath my feet and tore all my earthly possessions to smithereens. But my therapists were right about the quake playing an active role in what I was feeling. It was the main reason I was eventually healed.

Tremors Before the Quake

To say when my depression began is a little like trying to determine the sneeze that turned the cold to pneumonia, the tremor that triggered the quake. I began to feel, in myself, a crevasse. It shifted viscerally, noticeably; it gaped wide enough to trap small emotions; it began to fill with a deep sense of loss.

At intervals I could not determine or control, bits of memory lit up in my mind like scenes from a poorly lit movie. Their dimness did not frustrate me, but rather, drew me in. I looked harder to see them, certain that their plots were essential to understanding my life.

There were the nights I had gone swimming with friends in the local reservoir. They were beautiful for their simplicity, for the clothes we did not wear, for the way the cool water felt on our naked bodies; there was a silence behind every whispered laughter, and the stars shivered in a darkened sky we normally ignored.

There was the day—the only day—I ever went hunting. I accompanied a friend who had always condemned grocery-store vegetarians (like me) who felt virtuous in the "safe distance they kept from the guts of living." She challenged me and my open mind to try hunting once, to go with her.

A week later we sat silently, alert, almost perfectly still in the woods buried behind our little California city. I could not recall when I had sat so still for so long in one spot, the world folding in on me in that particular way: light cascading through trees, my senses heightened to every sound, every brush of movement magnified. It was as if my survival depended on my utter attention to the world in which I lived.

That night we dined together on rabbit. Though it was not the first time I had eaten meat, it was the first time I had witnessed the relentless beauty and the necessary violence that eventually became my little dinner; I had seen and felt the exact moment when the rabbit turned from subject to object, the warmth of its body in my hands, the earth and its remaining wildness becoming a part of my body.

Though no single event felt like a cause or a genesis of my

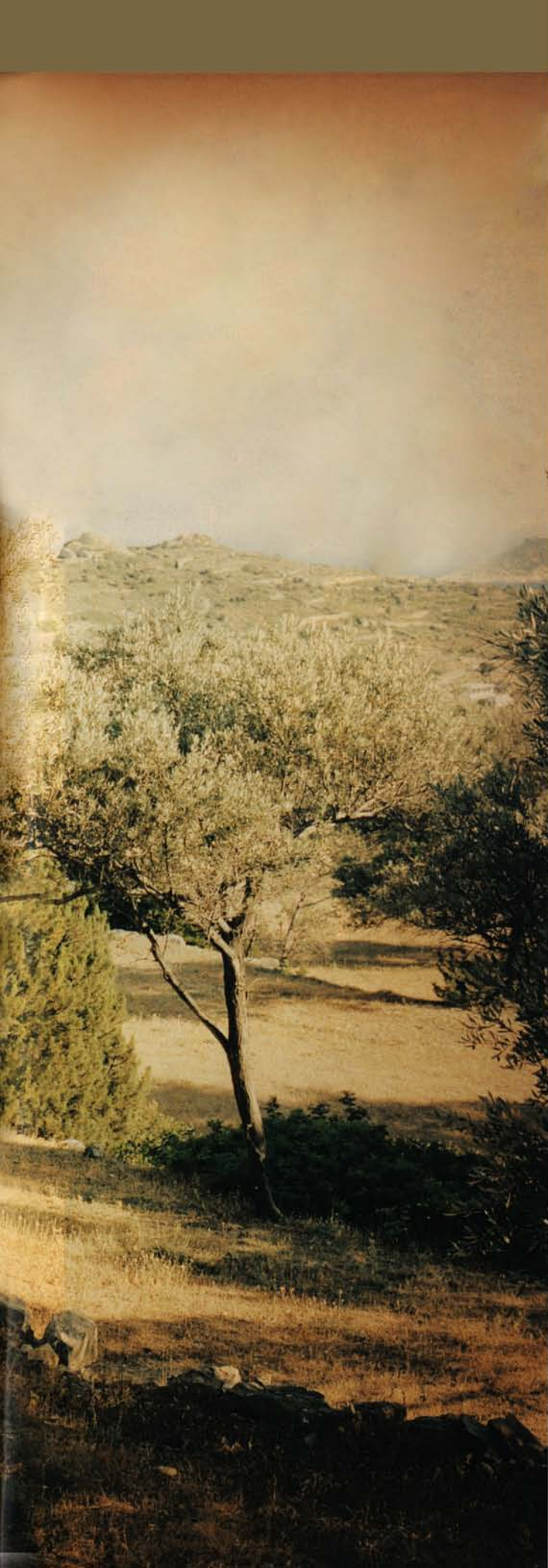
depression, my mind constellated images that carried a visual significance beyond language. These images relayed to me exactly how distant my daily existence had grown from everything most essential to me; they teased me with the possibility of a real connection to something substantial, not ephemeral—a sense of history, of my own place within history, of my own delicate but beautiful threads in a tapestry I could never fully comprehend. It was not a trauma that caused my deepening sorrow. It was the recognition of beauty, and of my increasing distance from it.

Aftershocks

When the quake hit, I felt the earth beneath my feet, and I saw the accoutrements of my life falling away. In the months that







followed, I no longer had access to many of the things I had relied on as part of my self-definition. I was not allowed to enter the area where the rubble, *my* rubble, lay at the bottom of a ravine. I was not allowed to attempt to recover anything. A large sign warned me that walking out to that dark ridge was both dangerous and illegal. The yellow tape, however, was less than a brick wall, and so one day, I ducked under it, sat on the hillside, and looked down. There it was: my life. A little pile of stuff that I recognized like I might an old friend; I was glad to see it, but I understood that we had to part ways. Most of the things I saw poking through the dirt held memories. I saw the arms of my jean-shirt reaching out of the mud, the pants that I usually wore with that shirt twisted, half buried behind it. The outfit looked as if it had tried to swim to the surface, as if it had struggled to survive. I saw photo albums and tried to recall the images they held. I saw books I had lugged with me from state to state while I was a student, the books I just could not let go, their spines severed, their muddied pages rigid in the wind, like flocks of dying birds. If I could have climbed down there I would have held them for a moment, then tossed them like doves into the air. From the perspective of the hillside, my life looked so small and so inextricable from the earth. I did not feel particularly bereft. I felt amazed.

My therapists were surprised by my response. They worried I was on a dead-end path, that perhaps I was leaning toward a romantic desire to drop out completely. They urged me to maintain a realistic balance. The life toward which I was traveling, they feared, was a simplicity conjured by nostalgia.

I explained I did not want to “return to nature” or to some nonexistent utopian era—I believed then as I do now that nostalgia pieces together the past into an incomplete picture, a lie. I did not want to go back; I wanted to stop. When I was on the freeway, forced to travel at seventy miles per hour in order to stay in the flow of traffic, I wanted to stop. When I was rushing from one meeting to the next, completely unaware of any sight, sound, beauty, or ugliness, I wanted to stop. I did not want a promotion, did not want a cell phone, did not want to trade my house in for a tent, did not want to wear buckskin clothes, I did not want to go forward or back to anything. I wanted to stop where I was, where we are, right now. I thought, *There is nothing else I need*. But the world kept on. I could not stop it. So I wanted to stop what I could—my life, my contributions to a world in which I did not believe. It felt like an answer.

I began to see death as similar to the laundry: I knew it was a necessity of life, and procrastinating it only made things pile up. That’s the sense I had—things were piling up—not unre-

solved emotions or guilt, as therapists and friends assumed, but material things. Houses, cars, insurance, bicycles, kayaks, clothes, photos, computers, software, memberships to gyms, memberships to professional associations, memberships to clubs, knickknacks, books, more cars, more insurance, more clothes. These were the things I had worked for. These were the things I did not want.

Subduction

sub•duc•tion *n* when two lithospheric plates collide and one is forced under the other.

The Loma Prieta earthquake was the shaking that upset the 1989 World Series, the quake that tumbled the Bay Bridge, killed sixty-eight people, injured more than three thousand, shifted sidewalks by ten feet or more, and made many seaside farmers' neat rows of garlic line up with rows of Brussels sprouts, the cabbage line up with artichokes. The magnitude of the quake was huge; it extended throughout the entire San Francisco Bay area. News reporters called it a "natural disaster"; others called it an "act of God."

The therapists and I worked on "the appropriate response to grief," the digging up of subterranean emotions. But I felt no real excavation. It was just language. What I understood as loss—my job, my nice car, my participation in a world with which I did not agree—my therapists saw as gain, and what they saw as loss—the fact that my clothes, my sofa, my television, my desk, my computer, went scuttling into a deep ravine—I saw as gain.

I thought of Saint Francis, the patron saint of San Francisco who, in the thirteenth century, stripped off all his clothes, handed them to his wealthy father, then began walking a rugged path toward the walled city of Gubbio. Some time earlier, he had heard what he believed was the voice of God saying, "My house is falling into ruin. Go and repair it for me." Maybe the earth shook beneath Saint Francis's feet that day; maybe he did not lose everything, but simply let it go. Maybe his response was not grief, but ecstasy. In Gubbio, he lived with weather and wilderness, celebrating all the elements that decorated "God's house." The beauty and the destruction; the violence and grace. When I mentioned this to the therapists, they said, "PTSD includes a diminished interest in social activities, feelings of detachment, and the sense of a foreshortened future."

I did feel detached. I was sitting in a room, paying an hourly rate to effect the human intimacy that escaped me as I ran

from one meeting agenda to the next, saying hello to scores of people I saw daily and whose names I wracked my brain to remember. I knew these folks only in the context of the four walls that surrounded us, like I knew my therapists. Everything felt packaged; I felt packaged. I did not fear that my life would be foreshortened (wouldn't a foreshortened future be irrelevant to a suicidal person?).

My therapists assured me that "external" stimuli were probably not the root cause of my depression. They said, "Let's talk about your family."

I soon felt myself drowning in self-absorbed trivia. I grew more depressed by the weekly search for the childhood trauma that the quake had dredged from my unconscious. But if that was really the objective of the therapy, I had no hope of catching up. As soon as I overcame the psychological damage caused by the way I was brought into the world, I'd have to overcome the damage caused by the way I was treated in first grade by some anonymous kid, and the way my first boss treated me, and the way my self-esteem was doused by the end of that job or that relationship, and so on and so forth ad infinitum until I die.

None of my therapists agreed with my suggestion that I could be stuck in depression because I was overwhelmed and felt "powerless over" whatever it was that had led us here, to a place and time where our lives happen almost exclusively inside temperature-controlled rooms sheltered from the pleasures of weather and wilderness. It did not fit into the therapeutic process that I could be deeply troubled by something not born of my ego.

But when I felt the earth rumbling through the soles of my feet, I felt a power I could not comprehend, a wonderful, terrifying sense of awe that had been dampened by living in an over-explained world. When the quake hit, I felt connected to something many would call divine. To me it was the simple mystery of being wholly and inescapably human.

Dancing on the Epicenter

After the earthquake, that constant tug I had felt earlier finally carved its way to my surface, and I was opened like sky. The dark ridge of loss that had been building within me crumbled, and in the rumbling that ensued, I was able to sort things out. I began to live as if my survival depended on my utter attention to the world in which I lived—to the loss, the violence, the absurdity, the celebration and the beauty.

Outwardly, my life changed very little as my depression waned. I did not hearken back to that impressionable hunting



trip, buy a shotgun, and take up hunting. I did not become a vegan. I did not sneak “environmentalism” onto the agendas of those interminable meetings I attended. I did not seek to speak more openly about my emotions, or habitually greet everyone I met with hugs. I performed the same tasks as before, but the avenues I took to them were different. I no longer drove to work, but rode my bike. I taught my classes wearing bike shorts and a hairdo shaped by a helmet.

On the way home, I often detoured off the pavement and pedaled through the woods. The path I rode through that almost-wilderness took me right along the fault line that had released its tension in 1989. I could sometimes see, with my bare eyes, the earth moving there: one wall meshing against the other, like two bodies grinding slowly on a dance floor. I gathered my geologist friends to confirm my sighting, and we sat for hours, staring at the wonder of the living earth beneath our feet.

It was not the only time I sat for hours staring at the wonder. The redwoods filled me with awe. The ferns filled me with

awe. A deer turd filled me with awe. I didn't wear this awe on my sleeve or market it to others; rather, I tucked it away in a quiet part of me. I was deeply content. On this last point, my therapists and I finally agreed, so I bid them farewell and thanked them for our time together. They had, after all, done me a good turn. Whether or not we agreed about the roots of my depression, they had listened to my arguments. Perhaps they, too, were frustrated that “distance from beauty” did not appear as a valid diagnosis in the *DSM III*—the textbook that outlines diagnoses required by health insurance companies. They honored my choice to battle through my depression without the help of medication, which, they said, could have alleviated some of the physical and mental suffering I endured. Eventually, they even nodded to my suggestion that something other than the vacuum of my own ego could have led to my depression; but they never comprehended exactly why and how I believed the earthquake had played such a positive role in my recovery.

Though the earthquake had instigated the process, other



factors had also helped me along the way. Among them was a silent conversation with a poet, Joe Bolton, who, at the age of twenty-eight, a month before his critically acclaimed poetry collection was published, killed himself.

On a crumpled piece of paper found a few days after his death, Bolton summed it up.

*I felt what I felt
Were parts of me
Starting to fall apart.*

*Outside, the bare tree
Shivered, and the black birds
Shivered in the bare tree.*

*I was afraid to walk out
And pick up the morning paper
Till well into the night.*

...

*And I was afraid to open up
The paper and read of a world
That had stopped having*

*Anything at all to do
With me, unless it be
News of my own death.*

The voice in Bolton's work became, for me, the voice of everyone who has ever asked, "Isn't there a chance it's we who require revision? How green do the grass, the trees have to get before you begin?"

As I read him, I knew his depression was imperative; I also knew that his suicide was (and mine would be) a mistake. It was not wrong or immoral; it was simply a mistake, irrevocable and immutable. In "Weightlifter Poems," he writes:

*Not of cancer, not of old age,
But suddenly—
As when the bar slips
And the iron comes crashing through my chest
Like the planet through some unlucky ceiling.*

*And I will be the man
No one remembers,*


*Who won't be able to tell them—
Even if he knew—whether it's worth,
After all, the strength it takes to carry on.*

A year or so after the earthquake, I could answer with certainty, Yes, it is worth it. On the other side of depression is a life unequivocally worth living. It is a certainty I first glimpsed in the moment the earth shook, and the power of connection that grazed me then is what gave me the strength to carry on.

IT TOOK ME A YEAR to find a new home after the quake. When I did, I uprooted the carpet of green lawn that surrounded the place. I tilled the soil and planted anything, everything native to that land. I wanted to give something back to the sweet black dirt that had saved me. I worked late into the night, gardening by moonlight. The cool earth felt like clay, and I felt like a potter creating something lasting, but delicate. With the night chill brushing across my skin, I planted seeds of food I would eat, flowers that offered beauty as essential to my spirit as food was to my belly, and bushes that would provide shade and nests to birds and other animals.

I dug to the bottom of my compost pit where the corn husks, melon rinds, and apple cores turned to a dark, unidentifiable muck. I lifted my shovel and carried my own private muck to a hole in the ground where it would provide nutrients for that year's mini-harvest.

As I worked, I relaxed into the solace that my body, someday, would become like this rich compost that offered so much continuing possibility. As for my spirit, it was already biodegrading, a sort of mythical centaur, half human, half earth, and that felt good to me.

The Loma Prieta (which means "dark ridge") had picked me up, shaken me, and dropped me right smack dab in the middle of geologic time. I saw that my life was merely a blip in the evolution of this huge and powerful thing called the earth—and I was grateful. Every morning, I woke up before dawn and counted my reasons for living: the trees, the scent of the ocean, the morning air, the night air, the air. I recited these reasons like prayers—no longer of desperation, but prayers of gratitude. It was a simple story the earthquake had told me—that darkness folds into sky, into rivers, into light. I am inextricable from the earth. 

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