

CAL POLY

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You're bombing down from Palo Alto to LA for work, and you're driving because you made the wrong choice, basically, but you could use the car time, for the privacy and quiet away from your 1,000 square foot apartment with your two tiny sons, and you say to yourself that you can make calls on the Bluetooth, though Sirius XM is just better than the phone backlog for the first couple hundred miles, and you pull off 101 when the email you've been waiting for comes in, because you want to respond but last week the Statie gave you a ticket for 'manipulating your phone while driving.' It's happenstance, or it's fate, or it doesn't matter why, but the next exit you come to is the first ramp into San Louis Obispo, where a hundred years ago mom did a masters in psycholinguistics. Mom called it Cow College and Aggie School the ten or twenty times she mentioned it while she was alive. It wasn't like it was a present episode in your upbringing. Something she mentioned on great occasion or when the family visited California and drove to see her friend Tops from back then who still lives in Santa Barbara. A chapter of a pre-life that doesn't seem to have registered high on the arc's importance scale. You've never been before. You pull onto the shoulder on the first street, and you notice the arrow pointing to 'State College.' Immediately you feel a slow and early warning agony. That's the kind that comes when you know you're going to do something you don't want to do, because it's the right thing but is so laden with baggage that you're going to be depleted and in existential crisis in the coming 12 hours. It's 60 days exactly since mom died, finally succumbing to a 20 year illness that first grim reaped your happiness when you were in high school. 60 days is like a mini yahrzeit, isn't it? That feels important. You know as soon as you see that sign that you're going to go looking for the campus. It's not like an hour out of your way will make you miss any meetings in SoCal. That's why you departed a day early, that's why driving is the wrong choice. You put the car in gear and eyeball the 101 South ramp straight across the intersection, and then you peel right without signaling, which is definitely not your way. Good-looking blonde, carefree, California girls walking in groups in the other direction signal that the state college is close. You enter the grounds in your car without fanfare, which is what would obviously happen except in the mind of someone who is suddenly aware he is going back in time. What was your mom doing here? A dark-haired, anxious, Jewish girl born in Brooklyn and raised in the Five Towns, transplanted from Hunter College to the permanently sun-blanching Santa Lucia hills. You remember that the only thing she said about California when you were growing up was that she hated it, that everyone there was intellectually bereft and noncommittal. That made sense now, in a flash, after

3.5 decades of hearing it. She had been in the wrong part. You curve your way around the campus's main artery at 5 m.p.h., trying to decipher which buildings would have been there when she was, what the college would have looked like when she had been a student. The thought breaches your mind that the buildings are all you have left of her. She must have been 22, 24, when she was here. She told you once that in hindsight psycholinguistics was exactly what her anal personality required her to study at the time. Where would one actually study anal-satisfying psycholinguistics on this campus, in this sun, with these good-looking Aggie girls? In which building? You drive past a series of recent sports team constructions and cheering posters with the galloping horse mascot plastered on the front. Had your mom been a Mustang? Had she realized she was one? Did she feel like one? Someone who so hated sports and did psycholinguistics in this environment? In your 35 years, you haven't till now seen your mom in a place when she was younger than you are, frightened, exploring, navigating her arc and the world around her, feeling its bigness, its indeed infinite possibility but equally infinite personal impossibilities, the incongruities that you finally grow up enough to realize don't fit. You pull over into a bike lane and crane your neck around to see if you just passed the psychology building. You wish it's there, so you can see it, and you wish it's the same as it was back then before you were born. Your eyes alight on the empty car seat on the passenger side behind you, where your 3.5 year old sits, and the rows and rows of tiny grasshopper stickers that he has plastered on the inside of his window. And I cry because I have never missed anyone so much.