



## MY HILL by Ariel Rubissow Okamoto



MATTHEW DAY

**E**VERYONE HAS A HILL. A line of land up and down that makes your heart leap. A small fold in the planet that signifies your place, your familiar ground. The thing that catches your eye when you get home, or drive up to the gate, or return from years in other landscapes.

It doesn't have to be your hill, or your family's hill since they arrived on the *Mayflower*, or a beautiful wooded hill like mine is, or close to a genuine mountain. For most of us, I imagine, it is just the tallest spot around our city or town or backyard.

My hill is a bump in a ridge of a fold in the coastal mountains between the Napa and Sonoma valleys, one of many hills around my family's 45-acre ranch. My hill rises about 800 feet above the Pacific and about 400 feet from my windows, and it has nothing on it but

trees. Eight firs poke black brushes into the sky along its crest.

The firs don't change with the seasons or the time of day, but all the other trees do. The thicket of oak, bay, and madrone that covers the hill right down to my windows almost always looks green. But in winter, as I'm writing, the leaves have dropped off a tangled swath of branches, fluorescent with lichen, showing me the brown arms of the forest, and the Wedgwood-blue flowers of the rosemary on my patio startle the foreground. In spring, white mists dilute my hill's silhouette. In fall, the green fades a little with the dust of long dry days.

When the day starts and ends, the hill is transformed. In the morning, the eastern sun lights only the top half of the hill—licking the bark of a madrone into flame. In those early hours the details are so crisp up there on the top, I

can see small white birds erupting from one tree and settling in another. In this light, the hill seems much closer. Later in the day, the hill recedes into a shape in shadow. By the time evening claims the day, Venus is rising over my hill, a beacon of dusky hours past and to come.

I didn't really see my hill until my husband built a picture window to frame it. The double panes are so big that from a certain angle you can see two other hills. These are prominent enough to have names on a map: Molly's Hump and Bismarck's Knob. The windows are big but the house is little and stands on a spur of ridgetop, where no one ever went except to dump trash or pile wood—until we built here, pouring a hundred cubic yards of concrete on the ancient habitat of wood scorpions. That's why I never really saw the hill until the house settled us on this particular corner of the ranch.

My house is a hundred years younger than my father's house, and I am 25 years younger than my father, but our hills are likely the same age. My father's hill is another bump in the same ridge. It's the one with the redwoods on top. In 1981, when he was looking for the perfect place to plant a vineyard, he drove up from the dark of Redwood Creek canyon and through a gate into the sunshine. He got out of the car and stood in a donkey pasture filled with light and saw that hill with the redwoods on it, and he knew he had to have that land. He later used the French word *clos* to describe the feeling he got standing there enclosed by the hill and the woods.

Over the years, planting that same *clos* with merlot, we have found that the clay soils are deep, deriving from a time when half the hill slipped away from the other half. My father plants new redwoods on his hill every year, and he made a trail from his house to the top of his hill and the ancient redwood grove. The oldest planting pricked the canopy of bay leaves last year. Walking the trail, you must take care not to step on the coral-bellied newts.

This morning, as I write, the winds animate my hill. They sweep over the rise of the coastal mountains, called the Mayacamas, down Redwood Canyon and up past our house and my hill, rousing the trees, tossing leaves, throwing acorns onto my roof as hard as fastballs. In the night the winds sound like ghosts. In the day they sound like ocean surf. All the time, the winds, and my hill, remind me of larger things. Tell me that I am part of something much deeper than anything C-SPAN or wireless Internet can tell. Reassure me that I may not just disappear into the hollowness that seems to rise up now when the screens of our brave new lives go dark.

I do not really believe in God or in the virtual world or in human goodness. But I do believe in the tug in my heart between me and my hill. I believe in old bonds, wherever they may come from and whatever they may attach to. I believe that everyone must feel this tug of the land we live on.

I have never climbed my hill or

looked up into the branches of its trees from the forest floor. It's owned by someone else and patrolled by people on horseback carrying guns. A seven-foot wire fence separates our land from theirs, and draws a line between the two properties. But it doesn't matter that I have never been there or that it is not mine. It only matters that it stands there, a familiar line of land, sheltering me from whatever I may imagine beyond. 🐦

*Ariel Rubissow Okamoto has been writing about water wars and environmental restoration in California for over 20 years. She manages her family's vineyards in the Napa Valley (rubissowsargent.com) and is currently writing a book about San Francisco Bay for UC Press.*