Low Ground and High Ground

Ana Maria Spagna
I he two-acre property my partner, Laurie, and I own divides cleanly in two: the high ground where we live now, atop an ancient moraine, and the low ground, where we lived years ago. In many ways, the halves are the same. Same trees. Same gravel road perimeter. Same mossy rocks. But while the high ground, these days, appears well-groomed—native shrubs line the driveway, high-limbed firs filter sunlight, a fourteen hundred square foot cabin stretches the definition—the low ground has gone feral: crisscrossed with downed cottonwoods, littered with flood-strewn lumber, silty and splintered, discarded skis, rock rubble, and, for a time, an unclaimed motorcycle helmet perched on a stump. No dwellings. Not anymore. One lone structure, a ramshackle garage half-sided and rat-infested, remains at the far end of the plat. We still use it for storage, so to retrieve our winter boots or a blow-up boat or a coffee can of lag screws, we must head down. But I don't like to. Not one bit. I avoid the chore at all costs, procrastinating, excuse-making, dreading the sight of ground, supposedly our own, flushed, scoured, trashed, abandoned. Maybe even haunted.

Truth is, the low ground was never much to brag about. When Laurie's mother first saw the place, she wept. For good reason. A rusted off-kilter swing set lay in the yard alongside hardened bags of mortar, stockpiles of broken brick, and several untended outbuildings. Brush filled in the gaps: thimbleberries and Oregon grape and fireweed, all of it brown with road dust. The former owners, a family of seven, had lived in a small unfinished house sided with T1-11, and they'd made a hard go of it: a woodshed, a garden, a smokehouse, and a hog pen. They fled when a November flood brought the river charging to the doorstep, seeping through floorboards. They were rescued in the bucket of a front-end loader, and soon put the place on the market. And we, knowing all this, spent our life savings to buy it.
We had reason to weep, but we never did. We worked instead, the way only earnest new landowners can. We were used to labor and enamored, despite our left-leaning politics and our meager means, of the American Dream. We planned, eventually, to move to high ground, but in the meantime we tore out moldy carpet and started anew: plumbing, insulating, stacking wood. We even planted a garden or, I should say, replanted the one that had washed to rubble in that November flood, then gone to weeds in one fallow summer. Reclaimed it, you might say.

We dug in cedar posts and spent $300—a small fortune at the time—on concrete mesh, strung it eight feet high to keep the deer and bear out, and we added compost and minerals to the rocky soil. One day when I was preparing holes in which to plant potatoes the neighbor’s cat, Daisy, nudged up beside me, reared up on her back feet, and began to dig full bore. With no idea what the purpose was, she threw herself at the task. I’m telling you: she was one of us, this cat.

That seems, now, like a very long time ago. A flood ripped through the low ground not once but three times leaving firewood scattered, cedar posts askew. Soil washed downvalley to fertilize brambles that finger now through misshapen rolls of mesh. We left the house empty, and we skedaddled. Daisy moved with us, trailing us to high ground with the neighbors’ blessing, claiming us and gifted to us both. Each fall I buck former fence posts into short pieces to split for kindling.

If our low ground is haunted, it’s by our youthful exuberant selves. But what did we lose? Not our lives, not our property. A neighbor couple had to sell off their flooded land, their summer home for over fifty years, to the government since there’d be no way to avoid future floods and likely no willing private buyers. We lost nothing, really, other than three hundred bucks, a garden spot and a few thousand hours of labor. Still I wonder: Was it worth
it? What was it all for? I can't face the low ground. Even though it's what we planned to see happen, even though I love that David Byrne song about parking lots turning to daisies with a passion, I can't face it. Sometimes I need to get the hell out.

RECLAMATION II

So we do. Though it's not as easy as it may sound. To leave the small landlocked mountain valley where we've settled in the North Cascades, closer to Canada than to Seattle, we must take a four-hour passenger-only ferry ride along a long narrow lake, a natural lake, glacier-carved and fjord-like, to a large Forest Service-owned parking lot where an aging Buick we inherited from Laurie's parents stays parked most of the time, then we must drive, usually, a very long way.

One gray December, we drove a thousand miles south to Whiskeytown National Recreation Area west of Redding, California where Laurie had been hired to work on old apple trees planted by early settlers and barely hanging on. Over the years, the trees had been stunted by lack of sunlight, shaded by oaks and sequoias, strangled by blackberries. Nothing was going well for these trees until Laurie showed up. Never mind that at home she does exactly the same kind of work or that, except for this job, she'd be laid off for the season and we'd be skiing, her favorite pastime. She didn't need the money. She wanted to work on the trees because they needed it, but also because she wanted to honor the fact someone worked like hell to plant them. You might think this had to do with what happened on our low ground, but it had more to do with her nature, and maybe human nature: she wanted to reclaim those trees.

Before she began, Laurie asked permission to burn as she went along. This is how she disposes of pruned limbs back home, and the warmth, in December, would be welcome. No way, the
managers said. There's a midden. Rats? Laurie asked. No, no. An archeological midden, a mound of obsidian chips several feet deep, the shavings from Indian tool makers, the Wintu, who lived in this spot along Clear Creek and in the surrounding Trinity Mountains, for twelve hundred years. Fire would melt the chips and destroy evidence of how they lived and worked. Rare evidence. OK, then.

To be clear, Whiskeytown is not mainly about apple trees. Like most federally designated recreation areas, it's a reservoir, this one created in the early 1960s by an earthen dam. President Kennedy famously attended the dedication. Each morning after dropping Laurie off to prune, I stopped beside the human-made lake and gazed at the hills, lush and green even in December, and every single time I did, I saw other people standing on the shore looking out: young and old, well-dressed and shabby, a mother and daughter, a man in a business suit, all of them on the way from somewhere to somewhere else. They stood stone-still and stared, taking solace from the uncluttered view, the human-free landscape, all that water. The reclaimed lake was lovely, sure, but I was still troubled. The problem with reclaiming, I found myself thinking, is that it so often leads to displacing.

So, while Laurie pruned, I set off in search of an explanation for who was here before the dam. Not so much what. I could pretty much guess the fate of the fish and the forest, and while I did want to know about that, my sympathy at the moment lay mostly with the settlers in the drowned town and the native people before them. So I headed out.

The nearby state park museum told a familiar saga: boom and bust. Gold rush desperados and Mexican ranchers and railroad Chinamen. As for Whiskeytown, the name derived from legend: once a mule tumbled off-trail, losing its load, and whiskey flowed into Clear Creek. The town was an outpost far off the beaten track dominated by men and miners and general lawlessness. It'd be a fair
guess that the town’s name did not come solely from one incident.

I wandered through the building, and the mishmash layers of history, and settled in the foyer at a small display dedicated to the Wintu. I lingered over a few blurry photos of bark-slab homes until I noticed an old-time phone receiver hanging from the polished wood railing. I picked it up. An elderly Wintu woman began to tell a long lively tale of how she survived a lightning strike as a child and because of that was told she’d live long. And she did, she lived long. That was it. Her obvious glee, charming as it was, depressed me. I held the earpiece in my hand and wondered: Is this all there is? The fact that she survived? Survived to see her land drowned, her people dispersed, diseased, murdered and enslaved. Outside rain fell in steady streams. Cars rushed along the highway. Her recorded voice chortled in triumph.

**DEFINITION**

Reclaim:

1. to recall from wrong or improper conduct
2. to rescue from an undesirable state; *also* to restore to a previous natural state *<reclaim mining sites>* b: to make available for human use by changing natural conditions *<reclaim swamp-land>*

As long as I can remember, I thought the word had only to do with dams. The Bureau of Reclamation. The word held the scourge of outmoded arrogance: the concrete and the oversized turbines, men with dress shirts stretched tight over their bellies, slide rules in their pockets and god on their side. “To make available for human use.” But also outmoded outrage. Marc Reisner’s *Cadillac Desert* predicted catastrophes of siltation that never quite materialized, not yet at least; John McPhee’s *Encounters with the Archdruid* profiled environmental super-hero David Brower and his fight to protect the Grand Canyon. “To rescue from an undesirable state.”
When I taught *Archdruid* to college students, mostly from Phoenix, in the early 1990s, they approached Brower with head-scratching befuddlement. After three full weeks, one young woman raised her hand to ask: How do they decide which side of the dam the lake goes on? I realized I'd omitted some crucial content and, perhaps, how little any of us understand the concept.

What is wrong or improper conduct? Especially when it comes to the natural world: What is an undesirable state? Where is the moral high ground? (Or for that matter the low ground?) And who decides? Judgments cycle. Fire is bad, fire is good. Predators are bad, predators are good. And with the judgments, so go our actions: Put out fires, start prescribed fires. Eliminate predators, reintroduce predators. Like Sisyphus on a hamster wheel.

Reclaiming seems an unstoppable instinct. We are workers, most of us. Sure there's greed and hubris, but much of the time there's earnestness. If we're going to work anyway, why not work at making things right? I can't help it. I want to reclaim reclamation. I want to find a clean-edged creed to live by. But where?

**ALTERNATIVES**

Back home in the small mountain valley, a river management plan had been in the works for months, a plan guaranteed to be unpopular. We'd attended a public meeting shortly before we left town. The gist was this: the river needs more wiggle room, more freedom to wander, to crest its banks on occasion and seep outward democratically. No longer should dikes or dredging direct the course. At the meeting, local bureaucrats arrived prepared to describe a new series of small-scale structures and road relocations. But they got no chance. The room was super-packed with attendees who were spitting mad.

How did they not know of these plans? they cried. Plans they believed to be a subterfuge, a ruse to allow the federal gov-
ernment to acquire private property from folks like my summer neighbors who'd sold out, to forcibly displace them.

I checked my watch, jiggled my feet, bowed my head to my chest.

Who knows? I thought. The angry people may be right. The plan offered four alternatives. I'd read them several times, and I could not make sense of them. I did know this much: A whole lot of property—including our low ground—lay smack in the middle of the so-called channel migration zone, and the river was poised to reclaim it.

At the meeting, one man stood to say this: "Remember this is Mother Nature. She might seem beautiful and docile, but really she's a bitch. You have to put her in her place, show her who's boss."

Chastise, he said, or maybe: Harness.

RECLAMATION III

I was down to one question. Just one. What is the dam good for? The answer did not seem obvious. At the Whiskeytown Visitor Center, three kiosk exhibits described the dam's construction, the miners and the gold rush, and the local large mammal populations. The books for sale featured photos of Indian basketry while others explained how to conserve water, identify birds, and recycle. The place felt like a kind of subsidized apology. But for what? Whatever it was remained unmentioned or unmentionable. I felt a little like I did when I watched age-appropriate sex education films as a kid: Yes, yes, but how does the sperm get to the egg?

I asked the volunteer ranger behind the desk the purpose of the dam.

"Flood control, irrigation, and electricity generation," she intoned.

But that is not what she wanted to talk about. She wanted
to tell me how she grew up here, and then moved to Santa Fe. Everyone moved on in those days, she said. No one stayed put. Now she’s returned and she loves it, just loves it. She launched into stories about her uncle, a logger and mill hand, who had worked in nearby French Gulch, who hiked miles through pine forests for dances. He was mourned at his funeral by many Wintu, she said. “What happened to the Wintu?” I asked. “They moved on,” she said. “They headed into the hills.”

PRESERVATION

Locals had recommended that we attend karaoke night in French Gulch, but we’d opted for early sleep instead, so we decided to check out the place in daylight. I arrived to pick up Laurie at noon, and she climbed out of a vine-choked apple tree with a chainsaw and hopped in the car. The road weaved five miles up a wide valley, recently burned, thoroughly and hot. Only a few black snags remained, and the barren hills offered stark contrast to the dense green everywhere else: Manzanita and live oak, pines and laurel. French Gulch looked barren, denuded even, and not just the hills, the town as well. The sign on the lone saloon with the white-wood façade read: Closed. We were out of luck.

A man sat across the street in front of an unmarked building with a single door wearing a Santa hat. “Where’s Santa?” I asked. “Not here,” he said. “Nowhere near. You seen the bar?” “It’s closed,” I said. I pointed to the large sign. “Not that one,” he said. “This one.” He opened the door behind him. Nearly all the stools in the place were empty, save those held by two morning drinkers, but nothing else was. Artifacts covered every wall. Laurie ordered two Budweisers, and the bartender, clean-cut in a polo shirt with a full head of gray hair and the dregs
of a healthy tan, pulled the beers in silence and turned back toward the wall-mounted TV, leaving us to gawk at the collection: cant hooks, gold nuggets on a scale, an artist's rendering of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. A wedding dress. Unfamiliar currency. All displayed like an orderly collage or layers of forest duff. Every museum I'd been to all week had seemed haphazard, incoherent, sometimes depressing. Not this.

When we ordered a second beer, the bartender tossed in a bag of Cheetos for free and started to talk. That wedding dress? A guy offered his wife 1200 dollars for it. She wouldn't take it. The ten dollar bill? That's from the National Bank of Lodi. The place had passed down through the women for 150 years—he married into the family—though not always as a bar. Used to be the general store. He pulled out hand ledgers with the cost for every item from 1865: whiskey 12 cents a shot, electricity 50 cents a month. He told his stories eagerly, almost greedily, and it was clear that he was the reason this place was so vibrant. Maybe to preserve something properly, I thought, you have to have something at stake, and when you do have something at stake—like us with our low ground, like our neighbors at the public meeting—maybe this was the answer: holding firm, hanging on, resisting the urge to move on.

"Which president is that?" I asked, pointing to the ten dollar bill. "Harrison? Van Buren?"

"That's me," said one of the morning drinkers. "When I was stuck in Lodi."

The bartender continued his tale. He came to town in the late 1940s to log, he said. His hob-nailed boots hung on the wall along with his falling axe. He once ran a chainsaw that weighed 100 pounds. Took two men to run it. Still, they cut more board feet in the old days with a hand saw.

"Why?" I asked.

"Bigger trees," he said. "Used to be three mills. Then we
ran out of trees."

Our beers were drained, our fingers Cheeto-orange, and we didn’t know what to say. I’d been so worried about what gets lost when we reclaim, when we start our infernal human meddling, that I never considered that maybe hanging on is worse. There’s fear in preservation — fear of change, fear of loss — a kind of stasis that inevitably breeds sadness. Hanging on happens when there’s not much left to hang onto.

We left a very large tip.

RECLAMATION IV

I had begun to suspect the truth, but I didn’t want to face it. I read a book about Whiskeytown and gleaned this much: They dammed the Trinity River and reversed the entire flow into the Sacramento River drainage. The details of the construction were staggering, nearly awe-inspiring: eight miles of tunnels, 17.5 feet in diameter, 480,000 cubic yards of dirt to be excavated and relocated. The book offered plenty of specifics, a heavy dose of politics, and the answers to my question. Sort of. Whiskeytown dam generates 154 megawatts of power at one powerhouse, then another 180 megawatts later after it passes through the tunnel. That is, by hydropower standards in the Pacific Northwest, peanuts. None of the dams on the Columbia generates less than a thousand megawatts. Grand Coulee alone generates 7,000. Then, of course, there’s also irrigation. The Central Valley Project. Back when I was a desert-bred teenager driving north to college, the lush green Sacramento Valley made me weep: rice paddies and almond groves and vineyards sandwiched between distant peaks, dewy and sweet. The book did not quantify how much of this could be attributed to Whiskeytown, but a Bureau of Reclamation website did. While over 300,000 acres are irrigated by the local behemoth, Shasta Dam, only 5,000 are irrigated by the entire Trinity River Diversion. For
that payoff they'd reverse a river?

RECREATION

Saturday. Laurie's day off. We met with old friends who lived nearby and took a long walk beside the Sacramento River. The air was balmy, the oak spackled hills green and shimmery in winter sun, everything as right as right could be. Still, I couldn't help but start in.

"But what's it for?"

My friend shrugged.

"Whiskeytown? That dam's for recreation."

"That's it. Recreation?"

"Of course," he said. "Who wouldn't want a lake in a valley that's over 100 degrees three months of the year?"

I was stunned. I'd deluded myself into believing that earnest reclaimers always have some decent purpose in mind, but that's the problem with reclaiming - isn't it? - the definition of a decent purpose is shifty. When President Kennedy dedicated the dam in September 1963, his rhetoric had that familiar moral tone.

"How great was the danger," Kennedy said, "that this great natural inheritance of ours given to us by nature, given to us by God, would be wiped away, the forests ruined, the streams destroyed, wasted for the people, water going to the sea unused."

In the same chapter where I found the quote was a picture of Kennedy feeding a deer.

We don't feed deer anymore, not at least while cameras are around, and we don't equate wild rivers with ruined forest. In 1963 everyone agreed that recreation opportunities more than justified the dam, and soon they had numbers to prove the point. The very first year one million people showed up.

All day I'd had Cat Stevens looping through my mind: *Morning has broken, Blackbird has spoken, God's re-creation of a new*
Being re-created is cool. No doubt about it. But is it enough to justify turning a river around to make it go the other way, swamping a town and god knows how many archeological sites, spending several million dollars in tax money initially and plenty annually on upkeep?

**RE-DEFINITION**

I began a list of what gets reclaimed. Rivers. Swamps. Mines. Ball players. Some examples were easily categorized. A new dam in China without fish ladders: bad. An aging Philadelphia Eagles receiver showing unexpected speed: good. Some examples edged toward deception: grass seed pressure-sprayed atop flattened former mountaintops to mitigate mining or wetlands bulldozed into vacant lots to mitigate development. But some stories were inspirational, very nearly triumphant, and the best seemed to be a kind of re-reclaiming.

Like the Elwha dams, a half-state away from my home in Washington, which once reclaimed water for power generation, now slated to be the first major dams in the country to be demolished to allow the return of salmon critical to the ecosystem and the local tribe, if the hoopla surrounding the project was any indication, to our collective identity as half-decent stewards. The demolition was creating a kind of euphoria. And, of course, a ton of backlash.

My first grade teacher used to tell us that saying I'm sorry meant you'd pounded a nail into a tree and now you've pulled it out. The hole is still there. Even as a kid I thought: well, then maybe it's best to leave the nail in. That seemed the argument against taking out the Elwha, that the hole would still be there, that it would cost too much money, and maybe the entire deal would be for show.

Still it's better to say sorry than not to. As any first grader
Reclamation, I decided, comes down to three concepts: To take back. To make right. To make useful. Over the months that followed the trip to Whiskeytown, I’d look for stories where the three intersected. I’d start with dams: how and why they were built, how and why they were coming down, and how the dams that remained were getting reclaimed, too, in a way, to make them more right, more useful. And the more I’d look for stories, the more often I’d run into Native Americans.

Like the Wintu. Who did not, as the volunteer ranger had suggested, head for the hills.

The name Wintu, it turns out, is broad, encompassing bands that lived in much of Northern California. One of them, the Winnemem Wintu, decided to take salmon restoration in the nearby McCloud River into their own hands. In an attempt to find salmon eggs from a healthy thriving run, they traveled to New Zealand to a hatchery run by Maori. Their plan – to transport and transplant the fish – is complicated, especially since they’ll have to navigate several federal, state, and local agencies. So the Wintu have work ahead of them, and whether they’ll succeed is anybody’s guess, but they’re stubborn, and they’re sure they’re right.

RECLAMATION IV

One thing we should have known about Whiskeytown but did not: there’s poison oak everywhere. Those vines Laurie had been sawing through? Yep. A month after our return, Laurie would require emergency room care and prednisone shots. It’s a damned good thing, we’d agree, that she wasn’t allowed to burn. Meanwhile, we’d head home before Christmas, trade rain for snow, Manzanita for buck brush, oak for fir. We’d drive over the passes, show up at a funeral, one of a half dozen friends dead from cancer in the past couple years, and return to home where the river, for now, ran low.
I'd pull the skis out of the garage where they hung from hooks we built in those early heady days, wedged behind a stovepipe that heated us when the garage doubled as a pool hall and a fan that cooled us and a shaggy shred of carpet Daisy used to climb to get above the fray. So much work, she seemed to think, what are you doing it for? The cat knew what we didn't. Now Daisy's gone, too. Two winters ago, we hacked her grave in the frozen ground. The high ground, not the low.

The temptation is always there, isn't it? To give up, to give in. Admit that what we do, even with the very best intentions, is often futile and sometimes worse than that. Wrong-minded. Harmful. Bad.

Until the need to make things right arises anew.

Our landless summer neighbors wrote in spring. They wanted to return to the valley and needed a place to camp and our deserted low ground was an obvious choice. So we started all over again: cleaning, watering, planting, reclaiming. We rigged up an outhouse with T1-11 scraps, a tarp, and an old pair of skis. We set up a campfire ring and set out some garbage cans. Our former neighbors, now neighbors again, set up a camper and a bug tent. We arrived for dinner with garden greens in paper towels and cut-flowers in beer cans as afternoon sun backlit the berry brambles. The low ground, for the first time in a decade, felt right.

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This much I know, we all know: change will come hard and fast—natural disasters and government decisions, dams and oil wells, then small pox or cancer or a left turn in traffic—and someone somewhere will arrive to reclaim it all, to fill in the gaps. Strangers from over the hills or across the sea or, hell, a faraway galaxy. For now, we are the strangers. And while we're here, we
hang onto the remnants, protect the glassy stone chips just under the surface, replant and restore and rebuild. We can't help it. We're reclaimers by nature.