

Reading and Writing the Landscape

English classes in “Ecoliterature” analyze great works of nature writing, study local natural history, produce journals, poems and essays, and explore Cal Poly Land on weekly hikes. Environmental Literature or Nature Writing is a vital new field of study in the Liberal Arts.



Journal entry, April 27, 2001

Once again, Mother Nature has cooperated with our tribe. A beautiful, sunny, hot Friday afternoon on the Central Coast. We began our ascent of the foothills which backdrop the Poly campus. The first thought that struck me as we marched through the crunchy, golden grasses was how quickly the ground has dried out. Only a week of dry weather after seemingly months of rain, and the soil looks and feels parched.

Halfway up the hill we came to an area dominated by reeds, a small marsh. Oozing, grimy mud-thick and viscous. Crossing this, we continued up the hill to a small plateau. Pausing to check the view of San Luis Obispo, I was amazed by the beauty of it all. Out on the coastline sat an ominous, foreboding fog bank—extending from Morro Bay down past Avila to Pismo. It appeared to be moving slowly closer, rolling over hill and dale to engulf us.

Looking down on San Luis, I noticed the sprawl of the city. Only 45,000 people, yet covering so much terrain. The most prominent natural feature of the landscape from this perspective would have to be the "Seven Sisters" chain—a series of peaks extending northward which dominate the horizon.

Continuing our journey up the hill, we came upon a shady area and a huge oak tree. Its limbs extended in every direction, gnarled and twisted, supremely functional. This would be the site of our reading of Thoreau. Fitting. The temperature difference between the exposed hillside and the shade beneath the tree was substantial—probably a twenty degree spread. I envisioned native American Indians pausing from their daily chores and taking a respite in this very place years ago. A spiritual feeling prevailed.

Onward and upward. I stumbled upon a still intact deer leg minus the rest of the body. It looked like a recent kill. I tried to imagine the scene which led to this carnage—a deer casually graz-



ing, unaware that a silent predator lurked nearby. Possibly a mountain lion or coyote. Above us extended a sparse landscape. Yucca plants dotted the hill, giving it the appearance of a Mexican desert. Only a few were coming into bloom this early in the season.

Time to head back down the hill. Running down the rocky trail on the verge of being out of control. At the bottom I looked back and felt a twinge of envy—several members of my tribe were camping out there tonight as I returned to my self-contained urban unit.

— Todd Marshall