

So What About Las Vegas? by Toni Petrinovich

Sitting quietly in the desert sun, the rabbits and quail soon became very used to our human presence. Nosing through the plant seeds offered upon the ground, they scrambled for the next taste, the hopeful nibble.

Suddenly, as though the sun itself was hiding from view, a dark, morphing, disfiguring shadow swooped down as a Red-tailed hawk zeroed in on a small, immature rabbit. With one tip of its wing and a perfectly aimed “touch and go” landing, it snatched the baby bunny in its razor-sharp beak and swooped up over the Utah Threadleaf Sagebrush.

Neither one of us took a breath. This was nature in action – survival of the fittest and the fastest. Settling back we gazed in rapt attention as the raptor began pulling on the soft underbelly, extruding the *lagomorpha* intestines and settling down to a lengthy feast.

Two hours west by southwest from our red rock perch and dramatic window on the world, a 70 year old pensioner was pulling, also. He, too, sat perched on red though rather than rock, his seat was made of faded vinyl and the viscera he pulled was the handle of a Las Vegas slot machine.

Three days later found us driving through Death Valley with a full tank of gas and extra water bottles – *just in case*. The stark landscape showed very limited signs of moisture and the water that had flowed through the washes and ravines was long since gone.

The vegetation clinging to life had either sent its roots deep, deep down into the ancient bedrock, storing up any sign of moisture in leaf and stem or had given up altogether becoming brittle, dry and desiccated by the prevailing winds.

An hour behind us in Pahrump Nevada, a newly-divorced mother of three swung through the 24-hour bar doors reaching with thirsty desperation for her first drink of the day. In her present state of mind, the world of sobriety was too vast, ultimately empty and eventually possibly suicidal. Storing alcohol in her aching heart and cells was the only obvious reprieve to a life void of love.

Heading into California, we began passing through pasture fields easily irrigated by flowing rivers. Boulder strewn fields seeped a seemingly endless supply of moisture, wild flowers still raised their cocky little heads to the sun even this late in the year and small deer scampered across the road.

Due to the ready irrigation, ranchers and farmers had planted human roots and horses, cows and cattle roamed field and hillock behind barbed wire fencing. Vineyards graced slope after slope, each grape waiting anxiously to burst its life’s juices into another vintage. Tree farms interlaced themselves among the milk and wine giving hint to Christmas tree cutting and the award of *bling* to those “loved”.

During the hotter summer months, the ground would turn brown and colorless yet the past year’s flooded fields provided ample hay for the grazers. The grapes and the pines would be replaced by another seeding.

Days passed and we entered Yosemite National Park stopping in awe to watch the flow falling in virginal grace over Bridal Veil Falls. As the water let go at the edge of the rocky precipice, it first slid over as a stream, slowly, so slowly, breaking apart into rivulets that hit the ragged, rocky ledges and regrouped again only to be disrupted and separated into droplets, then mist, as it gave up its life as water to become a cloud.

Further into the Valley, the Yosemite Park employees had staged a union protest in the Park only to be disrupted and separated by mounted police and the local SWAT team armed with rubber bullets. Rubber or not, is a union job worth giving your life for or is it only, once again, another cloud in the illusion holding court under Bridal Veil Falls?

We entered, stayed briefly and then left the hills of Sonora, California where we sat in deep canyons on the Stanislaus River talking with others who merge and emerge from and within the steady stream of life in cities, towns and villages finding quiet and peace in the infinite valleys of the Sierra Nevada.

During part of the year, it is apparent that bulldozers move the earth that these men otherwise move by hand asking the earth to give up her golden heart – gold! The noise of the earth moving machines does not faze this new age of forty-niners. Each turn of the rocky soil holds the promise of riches and that promise is often kept.

Back in Las Vegas, the pensioner shouts with joy as the cherries line up and the quarters fill the shiny hollow below the slot machine. In Pahrump, the divorced mother takes a stab at cooking dinner for her 3 hungry toddlers wondering if she will need to drink tomorrow. The desert and the rivers take turns being wet and dry without judgment or remorse. The water is still flowing over Bridal Veil Falls even though the Yosemite labor dispute is unresolved. And behind a desert rock, the Red-tailed Hawk begins another meal – this time, quail eggs.

As the California grape transforms its essence into California wine and the waters give life to the verdant earth without thought or care, so too, the human being uses resources, manufactures plastic replicas of nature and plods slowly toward whatever destiny awaits. Conscious or unconscious, deliberate or haphazard, each choice creates the next.

We stop in a shopping center for an espresso only to be accosted by a born-again Christian who tells us, “Brother and Sister, hear the good news. Jesus Christ died for your sins.”

Dropping off the cliff’s edge, the Veiled Falls blamelessly chooses to dissolve into the mist as a sinless rainbow welcomes us home.