

# Look-Aftering

written by Angela Youngblood | September 24, 2019



There is a tree with a good bole on it in the side of the yard next to the drive. I can sit in it. Prop my feet up. Dangle my hand over the edge and tamp down on the moss that grows at the base.

I lay here and daydream. Write poetry in my head and let it float into the air, ephemeral, and lift up like a bubble before popping. When bored of this I lift a chunk of moss and look for life beneath. Rolly-polys. Worms. Bugs without names. I silently watch their society. And when done, I place the moss back like a lid onto that miniature world.

This side of the yard has another tree my sister Amanda and I like to climb up and onto the roof of the office separate of our house. The inside of the office scares me. I don't remember anything much being in that space. Just an almost empty room with wood paneled walls and avocado carpet and it always smells kind of damp even in the summer. But the roof, despite its cat litter consistency that scrapes at our shins and knees if we don't climb from the tree just so, offers a greater vantage of our surroundings. Here one can sit and feel hidden in plain sight.

We are outside alone a lot. Today is no exception. But there is a car that I have not seen before parked just past my favorite tree where the fence is lower. It is parked on the other side of the drive just before the forest. And I can't be sure, but it looks like there is a man in the car. I keep watch. What does he want? Is he waiting for someone? I run a movie of cars I am familiar with in my mind: Not the Huey's station wagon. Not the Jacobzoon's SUV. Not the Mayfield's teal blue truck. This car is starting to become like a sore tooth. Something I begin to worry over. I climb the tree to my perch above the outdoor office. I think maybe I can get a better view of what it going on. I need to know that there is a real threat before disturbing mom.

There is definitely a person in the car. He looks like he is watching our yard. Is he "scouting" us out as mom would say? Is he a child abuser? By the length of time he is sitting there I assume he *must* be a predator. I think of my friend Lindsey's cousin who went missing (they think with an older man).

Or of Polly Klaas and how just a mile from our house at the Coyote Valley Pomo Indian Reservation they found the man who kidnapped her by knifepoint from her own sleepover and left her strangled body by the road. I begin to play a *60 Minutes* or *Dateline* episode in my head of three young girls kidnapped from their own yard in Redwood Valley. Polly Klaas proved there is no safety in numbers. I think about how at Halloween our mother takes us to the hospital with our candy to have it X-rayed for razors or tabs of acid. How we are the only kids there for this free service the hospital offers. Our mother included us in this: The world is not a safe space.

\*

I am hanging out with my older sister Alyson and her friend Naomi. Being the younger sister, I usually get partnered off with Efren, Naomi's little brother who just happens to be my age. Efren is a freckled kid with a brown bowl of hair. His clothes are always oversized and he is a bit of a dork. But he has a great smile and kind brown eyes. And I normally love to spend time with him—throwing ourselves into muddy ponds, investigating creek-beds, hunting for clay by the river's edge. But this is my older sister and her best friend. They are working on a school project and for some reason they are letting me help.

Efren and Naomi's house always smells like spices and body odor. Earthy, like walking into a natural foods store. I love this place. Here we are allowed to be kids but also treated as individuals. From the minimalist shelves lined with books, to the light filtering through uncovered windows onto the white walls of the living room. They have a TV, but I never see it on. It remains covered. This is different from our house. At our house a TV is always on. At our house our parents are there but not *there*. Naomi and Efren's parents maintain a watchful distance. A protected autonomy that holds the tenuous balance of a bubble. What a tender and difficult space to cultivate. At our house there is no bubble. They live in the bowl of the valley and you can actually see that you are in a bowl from this vantage.

The project has something to do with building a miniature cityscape. Naomi chooses something vaguely Moroccan or perhaps Egyptian and I think she is so exotic for this. I lick my fingers and they taste of salt. The buildings are made from baked salted dough and the effect is that they look like sand. It's perfect. Naomi cuts apart costumes for swatches of fabric to act as doorways and curtains. Alyson cuts some tiny metal coins from something that looks like a belly-dancer outfit and drapes them over an alleyway. I ask *What for?* They both say *Flair* and laugh. I think this is magic.

When we are done we all sit and admire our handiwork. Naomi's parents stop bustling in the kitchen to join in our admiration. If I could, I would forever sit in this warm feeling of pride and accomplishment. Youth suspended.

\*

I walk past the preschool five days a week. Twice a day, on my way to and from work. In the morning the the building and playground are full of children; Running, squealing delight, investigating their small corner of the universe. Here I once saw a girl hold a leaf up to the sunlight and watch the world filtered green. I feel lucky to be witness to such simple magic.

On my walk from work and back to my car the building is empty of kids. Now is the time for the staff to tidy up. I see them through the open windows, picking up toys, wiping things down. One day I saw a woman subconsciously petting a stuffed animal as she put some blocks away. In this way, perhaps, she decompresses from the day with a softness.

In the winter months I am startled to see one of the windows has been broken. By the web-like spiral it looks to have been done by a fist or a rock. A point of dense pressure that stretches outward. The staff closes the blinds to this broken middle window. They will hide the pane until it is fixed. It takes a couple months.

I think about that level of protection. Of hiding a violent senseless act from these kids. It warms my heart to the staff. Makes me think of my mother and her second-hand fear. How instead of insulating us from some of the harsh realities of this world, she included us in her worry and this became the lens through which we saw the world filtered.

Just today, when I was walking to my car, I noticed a lone man with noise-defeating headphones sitting on a bench in the enclosed play-yard. The bench has a dual purpose of plant container and seating and it is made of long stretches of wood that ring around a large oak tree.

He has a sander in his hands and he is slowly and methodically ridding the wood of splinters. A tedious and tender look-aftering. A look-aftering the kids will never know, save the absence of a splinter.