

Diary

EVERY YEAR, sometimes in September, but usually in October just before Halloween, when California's wild vegetation is driest and most combustible, high pressure over the Great Basin and Colorado Plateau unleashes an avalanche of cold air towards the Pacific coast. As this huge air mass descends, it heats up through compression, creating the illusion that we are being roasted by outbursts from nearby deserts, when, in fact, the devil winds originate in the land of the Anasazi – the mystery people who left behind such impressive ruins at Mesa Verde and Chaco Canyon.

There is little enigma to the physics of the winds, although their sudden arrival is always disturbing to greenhorns and nervous pets as well as to lorry drivers and joggers (sometimes scythed by razor-sharp palm fronds). Technically they are 'föhns', after the warm winds that stream down from the leeward side of the Alps, but the Southern California term is a 'Santa Ana,' probably in ironic homage

to Mexico's singularly disastrous 19th-century caudillo. For a few days every year, these dry hurricanes blow our world apart or, if a cigarette or a downed powerline is in the path, they ignite it.

They also offer lazy journalists the opportunity to recite those famous lines from Raymond Chandler and Joan Didion, in which the Santa Anas drive the natives to homicide and apocalyptic fever. (If you want to test the Chandler-Didion hypothe-

sis: lock yourself in a closet for a hour with a very powerful blow-drier – turned to 'hot' – and a friend or spouse. Do not take a knife or sharp object along.)

But one shouldn't read Dickens to understand the workings of nature in Dorset or Chandler to fathom the phenomenology of weather and combustion in Southern California. Our Thomas Hardy – or, more aptly, our Edna Ferber, as Ursula LeGuin once suggested – is an unfairly forgotten writer, Judy Van der Veer, who spent most of her life ranching in the rugged hills near the hamlet of Ramona, 35 miles northeast of downtown San Diego (named after the Indian heroine of Helen Hunt Jackson's 19th-century romance). Despite the BBC's incurable penchant for portraying Southern California through the prism of celebrity, it wasn't Malibu, but Van der Veer's Ramona that was the epicenter of the Witch Creek Fire: the largest and most destructive of the recent firestorm swarm. Like one of the cattle queens played by Barbara Stanwyck, Van der Veer rode line and mended her own fences, and from the saddle of her cow-pony Delilah she had a much clearer view of chaparral ecology than did Chandler through his gin bottle or Didion through the rolled-up window of her speeding car.

Brown Hills (1938) – the second in a brace of carefully-observed memoir-novels – is the diary of a long drought similar to the current aridity in Southern California. (My twin toddlers, like the calves in Van der Veer's book, scarcely remember what rain looks like.) 'Should a good fairy ask me what I wish, I know what I would say! I

wouldn't ask for a golden palace, or Arabian horses, or a handsome lover. I would wish for rain.' But instead of rain, an October Santa Ana howls over Black Mountain and blasts her Ramona ranch.

I could see herds of dust being driven into the eastern end of the valley and hurried down the river, leaving, for a second, clearness behind them. Then another gust and the east was hidden and more yellow clouds came surging through the valley. The trees curved this way and that, losing more leaves with every swoop, and branches were torn away. Later I found arms of eucalyptus trees in the corral, red sap, like blood, at the several places . . . My mare stood unhappily with her mane and tail whipped around her. Her nostrils were dry and sweat caked whitely on her coat. My eyes hurt, my chest felt full of dust, my hair stood stiffly up like the horses' tails. We seemed to be watching a big fire whose flames were yellow instead of red, and it was consuming our land while we looked helplessly down.

Luckily the Santa Ana abates before the lightly inhabited backcountry of the 1930s catches fire; the good fairy finally brings rain; and the brown hillsides turn green with clover, deerweed, and alfalfaree. But, as Van der Veer insists, happy endings are not inevitable: Southern California is a land of risk and natural drama, where the unpredictable cycle of the seasons is as suspenseful as any noir novel. Her Ramona valley is not Ohio or Dorset; ranchers and farmers don't so much 'settle' the land as learn to roll with its punches, enjoying luxurious interludes of beauty between waves of disaster. Moreover, in Van der Veer's time, the 'back country' was tr-

ly that, and a broad corridor of avocado and citrus orchards separated the cow ranches and turkey farms from the urbanized coastal strip.

Three generations later, the vast citrus forests that once surrounded Los Angeles, as well as cities like Riverside and Anaheim, have been transformed into pink-stucco death valleys full of bored teenagers and desperate housewives. East of Los Angeles, in the San Geronio Pass above Palm Springs, where 4000 giant wind turbines harvest the Santa Anas, new subdivisions are being built next to 50-year-old chaparral standing eight feet high and yearning to burn. Throughout the foothills, meanwhile, free-range McMansions – often castellated in unconscious self-caricature – occupy rugged ocean-view peaks surrounded by what foresters grimly refer to as 'diesel stands' of dying pine and old brush.

The loss of more than 90 percent of Southern California's agricultural buffer zone is the principal, if seldom mentioned, reason why wildfires increasingly incinerate such spectacular swathes of luxury real estate. It's true that other ingredients – La Niña droughts, fire suppression (which sponsors the accumulation of fuel), bark beetle infestations, and probably global warming – contribute to the semi-annual infernos that have become as predictable as Guy Fawkes bonfires. But what makes us most vulnerable is the abruptness of what is called the 'wildland-urban interface', where real estate collides with fire ecology. And castles without their glacises are not very defensible.

On 26 October, Day 6 of the fires, I saw the ruins – perched precariously on a wild mountainside – of what my friend Kozy Amemiya described as ‘a Tokugawa fortress in a Kurosawa film’. Its twin turrets had been reduced to some twisted girders rising 9/11-like from a smouldering mound of grey ash but the putting green next to the driveway remained eerily pristine.

Kozy and her English husband Tom Royden, are Ramona avocado growers, the last of a dying breed in a rapidly suburbanising landscape. One of their two ranches is located in the same hills east of Ramona where Van der Vere’s horses once grazed; the other, larger orchard occupies the side of a boulder-studded mountain (imagine the gods playing dice with Stonehenge) overlooking Lake Ramona. Kozy has a PhD in sociology (she’s an expert on the plight of Okinawan farmers whom the US military authorities induced to immigrate to Bolivia in the 1950s); but Tom’s graduate degree is, literally, in avocados – from California State Polytechnic at Pomona.

Although slightly bent by a bad truck accident a few years ago, Tom (69) is still almost as tall as Charles Dance. He has Lloyd George eyebrows, always appears in pressed khaki shorts, and is armed with an encyclopedic knowledge of irrigation and tropical/semitropical agriculture. For those of us who have seen too much BBC re-broadcast on local public television, Tom could easily pass for one those planter types who caroused at Raffles and ran vast rubber estates in Malaya or raised coffee and caused white mischief in the

Kikuyu hills. Indeed, Tom’s dad wrote in ‘merchant adventurer’ as his occupation on his passport, and his mother was descended from generations of Kent cherry farmers.

But the old-school-English stereotype is deceptive. Tom, in fact, has spent most of his working life advising village cooperatives in Tanzania and with Andean farmers in Ecuador. He and Kozy went to hear Chalmers Johnson lecture on the decline of empire on one of their first dates, and he proudly displays ‘Stop Blackwater!’ bumper-stickers on all his trucks (the mercenaries want to build a training facility in the San Diego backcountry). Their closest friends in Ramona include exiled Latin American artists, antiwar activists, and an extraordinary high-school music teacher who plays harp to soothe premature babies in incubators at a local hospital.

Kozy and Tom are also eloquent evangelists about the need to save, if not expand, what remains of an agricultural fire break in Southern California. Their own fire history is instructive. In 2003, the Cedar blaze (which killed 15 people and destroyed 2400 homes) passed south of the larger orchard; this time, 50-foot-high flames charged the mountain twice, burning dozens of isolated homes, before resuming their march towards the Pacific. Both ranches were once again saved – or so it seemed. Then, in the midst of the evacuation of Del Mar and Encinitas (famed beach towns just north of La Jolla), the Ghosts of the Anasazi suddenly stopped howling. The Santa Ana, however, was punctually replaced by a strong sea breeze

that turned the fire around, saving the beaches but condemning the avocados in Ramona.

But, as Tom points out, his trees put up a 'bloody stiff fight', providing a firewall that saved several of his neighbors' large houses. 'Except in an extreme conflagration, fire will only penetrate about 10 or 15 meters into orchards when the ground is cleared and well irrigated.' He takes a penknife and scrapes at charred bark: the flesh is still green. 'Most of the burnt trees are still alive, although they won't bear fruit again for several years.' When I express surprise, he chuckles. 'You should see oranges. They're almost as fire-resistant as the live oak.' (Our native oaks, in fact, have an erotic need for an occasional fire to assist their reproduction.)

The burly toughness of the trees is reassuring, but there's bad news too. When we drive along the dirt tracks (occasionally having to use machetes to chop through barricades of windtoppled trees) we leave behind a deep, mushy trail of guacamole. The fire and wind have stripped several hundred thousand fruit from the trees, and Tom estimates that he has lost seventy per cent of the crop. 'Sad, because demand is still soaring and the Chileans have been knocked out of the market by disastrous frosts. We were hoping for a million pound harvest next month.'

The Witch Creek Fire has also destroyed much of the irrigation infrastructure throughout the Ramona valley, melting plastic and aluminum piping, and knocking out the big generators that pump water over the mountains from the Colorado

River two hundred miles away. Water authorities are apprehensive about toxic contamination and contaminated wells. On the road to Ramona, an electronic billboard flashes an urgent warning: 'Do Not Use the Water.'

Kozy has heard that as much as 50 per cent of the San Diego avocado crop has been lost, only three weeks before harvest, and the future of local horticulture looks bleaker than ever. Soaring rural values and increasingly expensive water have conspired along with strident suburban ignorance of farm life (newcomers complain to the sheriff if they hear a tractor engine before 7am) to squeeze their bottom line. Likewise the monopoly power of the supermarket chains has forced growers to substitute alligator-skinned, easily refrigerated Hass avocados for the thin-skinned, anise-flavoured Fuertes that connoisseurs prefer. As if that weren't enough, California's honey bees are dying en masse from a mystery disease. Kozy sighs: 'You have no idea how hard it is, even with lots of bees, to pollinate avocado flowers.'

Now, I know as little about the delicate manoeuvres of avocado pollination as I do about the mechanics of putting stallions to stud. But I do care deeply about avocados. In the 1930s, my older sister cantered her Indian pony through my parents' small avocado 'ranchito' in Bostonia, about 10 miles south of Ramona, and the little house my father built with its knotty-pine walls has survived every fire. Otherwise, little of my childhood Bostonia remains. The Barker family's 1880s general store,

the irrigation ditches, the country-western dancehall, the gas station that sold 12-year-olds cigarettes, the Fryes' hardware store, the lemons and the pomegranates – all vanished in a whirlwind of 'growth'. What remains are aging tract homes, a plague of auto body shops, intractable methamphetamine addiction, and long lines of tail lights headed out toward the brave new suburbs of Lakeside and Ramona.

Kozy thinks my nostalgia is sheer defeatism and tries to cheer me up. 'Did you know there are some really magnificent Fuertes still bearing fruit on Chase Avenue? They're probably a century old.'

This is not quite the consolation I need. Avocadoes have always been the icon of San Diego's countryside (which produces most of the US harvest), and if the remaining growers are forced to sell out, the past will become as inaccessible as the future will be combustible. I can easily visualise the impending apocalypse: more view homes on the graves of trees, the wonderful art-deco Ramona Theater bulldozed for a Home Depot, the Turkey Inn turned into a Starbucks, a Cineplex where Judy van der Veer's home used to be.

I suppose the realist view is that our fire problem will be ultimately solved by burning all the fuel and then paving the ashes. In Southern California, catastrophic fire only fertilises more sprawl.

I pop the big question to Tom. 'Can you really get this ranch up and running again, or will some home developer make you an offer you can't refuse?'

Tom furrows his eyebrows for a mo-

ment, then smiles.

'Do you know the etymology of the word 'avocado'?'

'Aguacate' in Spanish," I mumble.

'Yes, but the Nahuatl original is 'ahu-catl' – balls.'

Mike Davis