

Chapter Twelve Questions & Answers

Bend, Book, and Ohashi led Jack and Pen down the stairs, past the pub, and over a narrow, elegantly designed footbridge to the other side of the river. Hand waved them off at the pub and went in to help prepare for the evening's mote. On the west bank of the river, a seemingly random patchwork of crops and small groves spread into the foothills and along the water toward the north and south, punctuated by large areas of native flora—especially sagebrush and creosote bush, or by reeds and other marsh-loving plants adjacent to the water. As the company entered the first plot, Book began to talk about the reasons for the “untidiness” of the fields.

“You’ll probably notice immediately that these aren’t conventional farm plots,” she explained. “Instead of expansive fields of single crops, we practice a fairly intricate system of permaculture, in which plants that do well together share growing conditions, and other plants shelter or nourish those growing nearby.” She pointed to a small grove of fruit trees among which beans were growing up trunks and around limbs. “This allows us to provide shade for plants that don’t need as much sun as we have, but don’t harm the trees they’re using as support. Other plants grow in rows dug more deeply than companion plants to take advantage of higher water availability in the lower rows—but ‘rows’ might seem an odd description, since they undulate around rises and dips in the land profile.”

Pen admitted to being confused about the intricacy of the whole arrangement. “It seems as though having all this stuff intermingled like this would require a lot more work than having rows stretch out in more easily cultivated patches.”

Bend smiled, and said “There you go again—on about efficiency. You’re right, though. We probably could farm more conventionally without significantly affecting the ecology of the area. But we also want to avoid imposing ourselves on the environment as much as possible—the small footprint idea. We tread as lightly as we can, but recognize that human beings do have a place in the overall pattern of life around here; we just try to keep the impact small. We do expand farmed areas at times, and open up new areas to settlements occasionally, but not without deliberation or discussion. The less we do, the more room we have for flexibility.

“If we were to disappear overnight, archaeologists from the future wouldn’t find much to show what had gone on here: the stone bridges and a few sculptures, perhaps, and some of our glass and ceramics, but little else. Even our fences and walls, like the one up the path, are made of bamboo or willow, and designed to be temporary. We would actually like people to wonder about how this place was used, and to leave them as little information as possible—sort of like what Pueblo peoples did in the old Southwest: buildings and pots and astronomical alignments, but not a whole lot else. Not even middens, because there’s no waste.”

They walked past the beans and apricots and came to an open patch of herbs, with lavender clearly the most abundant crop. Pen commented, “Well, this looks more like it—although it’s not exactly a lavender field like those in Provence. Still, it’s more open than most of what’s around here.”

Book replied that the plant itself dictates the growing method: “Lavender likes sun. So we grow it and other sun-lovers out in the open. If you look over toward the foothills, though, you’ll see that along the margins of this field there are other herbs that will be shaded by fruit trees later in the day. But this field is kept small, and several others are planted elsewhere. When it blooms, as it’s beginning to now, we can see patches of purple up and down the valley from the mote house; and on a particularly hot, still day, the air is suffused with

lavender. It must be true that it's a relaxing scent, because things really tend to mellow out just before harvest. We mostly use it medicinally and as a pillow stuffing, and everyone seems happy to participate in the harvest.

“One of the books up at the mote house contains some lovely watercolors of lavender fields and sheaves and folks steeping lavender essence in big pots in a pub kitchen, along with an image of linen sheets hung on a line after being rinsed in lavender water. Very bucolic stuff, and really pleasant to sit and look through. The harvest is one of the reasons the summer festival occurs when it does. Everybody's in a good mood, most of the crops are at their peak, and it will soon be time to start haying and then winding farm activity down before the winter crops go in; we do our canning and preserving in time with the harvest, too—and break out the first jam at the festival. The seasonal ebbs and flows add an almost musical rhythm to life here, and so we celebrate them frequently.”

Jack commented that this looked a lot like his native Portugal, with the small farm plots and intense sunlight. “Not,” he noted, “like the big farms on the other side of the mountains, where the entire valley is filled with huge orchards and feed-lot dairies and vineyards. In Portugal it's more like this, but with short stone walls and stuccoed farm houses. This is more European than American, is it not?”

Bend replied, “That's not a coincidence, really. Permaculture actually got started in Europe, where the big factory farms had not yet taken over, and people were still familiar with the idea of the smallholder. By the time we came here, the family farm had all but disappeared in the United States, and except for a few ‘boutique’ farms and dairies that could sell to a select clientele or to upscale restaurants, agribusiness had taken over farming and made it into a massive, mechanized mono-cultural food-manufacturing process. And most of the ‘food’ was junk with minor nutritional value—snack items and sugary drinks. Big agriculture had also spread to other countries, especially South

America, where most of the crops were exported to the United States, rather than feeding local populations. But in other places, like Australia and New Zealand, permaculture had gained a bit of a foothold, so quite a number of people who came here from commonwealth countries brought their expertise with them. The commitment to small-scale, sustainable farming practices was one of the cornerstones of this whole endeavor. And now, on the other side of the mountains, all those big farms are covered by a vast inland sea.”

Since Jack was obviously tiring, Bend suggested that they head back to the pub and take advantage of the shade and chairs. They took another meandering path past a half-dozen munching cows, through more small plots of tomatoes, peppers, and eggplant in a dizzying palette of hues, back toward the river. At the water’s edge, within a small bay, a raft was tied to a post, against which stood two long poles. Noticing Pen’s puzzled look, Book explained that some of the children had designed the raft for ferrying larger objects than couldn’t be easily carried over the bridge. “The next bridge up is wider, but the children thought this would be more fun and would teach them some engineering skills—as well as enhance their rafting acumen. What’s really amusing is when one of them has to cross the bridge to retrieve the raft from the other side of the river from where they need it. But the joy is in the doing, so they haven’t decided that they need another raft, or that it needs to be tied up on one side or the other all the time. Notice the dock over there, near the pub,” she said, pointing across the water. “Since the river’s fairly broad here, sometimes they just anchor the raft in the middle and use it to fish from; then they ferry the fish over to the pub and fry ‘em up fresh.”

They walked back across the bridge, and arranged themselves comfortably under the ramada that extended over the dining area of the pub. A large cottonwood tree nearby would provide shade later in the day, but at the moment the grapes growing overhead, mixed in with some honeysuckle, provided plenty of relief from the day’s heat. “The nice thing about dry heat,”

said Bend, “is that sweat really does its job; and if that’s not enough, we can just go over to the river and splash some water on ourselves: portable evaporative coolers.” He then walked over to a trough where spring water overflowed into a conduit that led to the kitchen garden behind the pub; he gathered up a pitcher and mugs on a tray, filled the pitcher from the ‘fountain’ and brought it back to the others.

“Pardon me if this sounds indelicate,” mused Pen, “but nobody here seems to smell particularly ‘earthy’—if that’s the word. One would think that along with sweat come aromatic byproducts of some sort, but I don’t imagine that you folks brought a lifetime of personal hygiene products with you when you came.”

Ohashi laughed so hard he almost accomplished a spit-take; when he recovered, and the others had stopped laughing as well, he explained the situation. “Our sensibilities about such things are somewhat different than what you’re probably used to. We bathe frequently, but not obsessively—often just jumping into the river for a dip; we also make use of a variety of herbal preparations, vinegars, and minerals that are harvested from the big lake. But there’s something about good, honest work and the absence of artificial odors and perfumes that mitigates any ‘byproducts.’ Unpleasant odors are often a consequence of unhealthful ways of life, including bad dietary choices, so they occur infrequently here; a foul smell would probably indicate disease and someone would call a doctor if it were noticed.”

“We aren’t particularly concerned with ‘dirt’ in the same way the old world was, either,” added Book. “Most folk’s homes actually have tamped dirt floors, which get swept out frequently, and they put rugs down during the winter, but this would not have seemed particularly ‘civilized’ where we came from. Nobody really ‘dusts’ around here, either, mostly because we don’t own many decorative objects that just sit around on shelves. Almost everything we have is used, and if it’s not—if it’s just something we think is beautiful for whatever reason—it’s frequently touched or handled. No vacuum cleaners needed here,

thank you. We might wax a table, or polish a musical instrument, but that's to keep it in good shape rather than to clean it.

“Even the books up in the library are in such regular circulation that I don't often need to dust the shelves. But the shelves themselves get waxed and polished a few times a year because they're so well made and such a pleasure to take care of—and we do design and construct our necessary objects to last as long as possible. What we do is home-keeping: economics in its original sense. So the drudgery associated with 'housework' or 'yard work' in the old sense doesn't exist here. Those who aren't fond of gardening don't grow gardens—although they work in gardens and farm plots when they're needed. Those who don't like to clean up after themselves live in small rooms with little stuff. People who don't like to wash clothes tend to jump into the river clothes and all, then hang the wet things up to dry. But most of us find such things pleasurable, and so do them happily; taking care of one's possessions and space is just about the first thing children learn to do as well. It's all essential home economics—the way the home works.”

“It's also all of a piece,” mused Bend. “It's all for the long haul; nothing is short-term. We see this whole endeavor as ongoing, slowly evolutionary, *becoming*. Nothing is ever truly finished. All of us here are in the middle of something that we hope will go on forever. There is not vision of a bigger, better future. Things proceed, but they don't necessarily progress. Evolution is about changes that happen, not about striving toward a particular end, or some kind of perfection of humankind. And although the community itself had a distinct beginning, we are conscious of its artificiality. The children are much less aware of this; they have been raised up in this cyclical environment, where things go on in a pattern, a rhythm, that pulses, but doesn't really start or stop. When one has no electricity, one lives according to the presence or absence of light or warmth; in the absence of clocks, the rhythm is syncopated—but it's still a pulse; it's just not based on a mechanical, ticking machine—although even mechanical

clocks, like some of the old ones we have around, need winding. Without attention, they slow down and stop. But they're just curiosities and not really a good metaphor, because when they do stop, somebody goes out and looks at the sky to determine the approximate mechanical time, and resets the clock. So no two clocks in the valley are set at exactly the same time."

They all enjoyed a good laugh at this, and Pen decided that this might be her favorite discovery so far because it showed how very different this life was from her own. But Jack was more interested in how people lived in the valley physically, and so changed the subject. "Does everyone live communally here?" he asked. "I don't see many of what I would call 'single-family dwellings'—but nothing that looks like a dormitory, either."

Bend replied, "Pen got a better idea down at Cottonwood, where she saw people living in enclaves with multiple rooms. Almost everyone here has a room or two of his or her own in some larger unit. The only really imposing structures are the mote houses. We also put up fairly large, temporary summerhouses for use when the weather's warm—for weaving and other activities. But some communities do things a little differently. Some build longhouses which sleep a number of people in small 'roomlets,' like Hand's inn. Others live primarily in yurts or other portable structures. The shepherders who take their flocks up to the summer pastures live for whole seasons in tents or wheeled wooden caravans, like old gypsy wagons. The main idea is to occupy as little space as possible, so housing tends to be compact; even in winter we spend a great deal of time out of doors, so our living areas tend to be cozy rather than expansive, and simple to keep warm or cool, depending on the weather. The children often construct small 'communities' during the warm months, experimenting with different kinds of structures. It's not uncommon to see an open area taken up with odd configurations of experimental housing. Adobe is about the only thing we *don't* use, except for plaster, because of the earthquake potential. But so far

what we've built has withstood even the severest quakes—and we've experienced about a dozen of various magnitudes since we arrived.”

This piqued Jack's interest as a planetary scientist. “What is the geological situation now?” he asked. “If this is the ‘future’ of where we came from, what has happened?”

Ohashi grinned, making it clear that this was his area of expertise. “It is apparent that several thousand years have passed,” he began. “We call this period the ‘Neocene’ because there has clearly been at least one glaciated period, not unlike the Pleistocene, which was followed by the equivalent of what we called in the old world the Holocene. Even though they were probably all part of the same glaciation, we speak of them as though they were discrete events primarily for convenience. But one reason the mountains look much the same to Pen is that the glaciers simply filled up the old cirques, and didn't have to carve out many new valleys—as if someone had built chutes for them to travel along; the terminal moraines are quite small as a result, and the main profile of the mountains has altered relatively little. Few of the peaks on the eastern side had glaciers at all, except to the north, so they look very much the same, except for erosional features. Alluvial fans like the one we're sitting on are wider and longer, and cut through by a much larger river.

“At the same time,” he continued, “it is also obvious that the fault block in the center of this valley has dropped lower than it was in the former time, and the mountains on the western side have risen slightly—indicating that mountain-building is still occurring. Evidence of at least two major earthquakes along fault lines we already knew about can be seen just over there, beyond the river, and to the south, near where a big quake had occurred in historical times. There has been little volcanic activity, however; we've found only two ‘new’ cinder cones to the north, and they seem to have been dormant for seven or eight hundred years. The old cinder cone that was so dominant just south of here has worn nearly away. Some of the geologists have discovered evidence

that a peak to the far north of the chain had erupted not long after we left—perhaps what we used to call Mt. Rainier or Mt. Hood. It’s hard to tell from the ash layer without more sophisticated instruments. We were most concerned about the area just north of the next settlement up river, but that seems to have calmed down; instead of erupting, it has sprouted geysers and more hot springs, perhaps venting energy that might otherwise have resulted in volcanic action. It’s quite lovely up there now, especially without all the development that had once obscured its beauty. We only go up there on expeditions these days, although the shepherders travel through in alternate seasons.

“By far the most significant change has been the deepening and refilling of the great lake at the southern end of the valley. It is still fairly alkaline, but no longer dry. Its minerals are still accessible and useful to us, although we have no need for large-scale mining like in the old days. And as a result of the increase in stream flow out of the mountains on both sides, the valley is more temperate despite the existence of the rain shadow. Crops that need more water than the rain supplies can be easily irrigated, and most crops do well, despite colder temperatures and a shorter growing season. What can’t be grown here, and what seems useful or necessary, like citrus and olives, is grown to the south of the valley, where another old dry lake has filled up again and the temperatures are warmer.”

“One thing I noticed across the river,” interjected Pen, “is the cows. They seem very small. Why is that?”

Bend answered, “They were here when we got here, so we think that they’re simply descended from survivors of the old herds that once grazed here; during the glaciation, they may have migrated or simply ‘downsized’ themselves as an adaptive strategy—smaller herds need less food, that sort of thing. Or, they may simply have reverted to a more natural size; most cattle were once bred to be as large as possible. At any rate, we’re quite happy with them at this size, since our meat and dairy needs are fairly small. Human beings aren’t raised on

cow's milk here, but we do drink it occasionally, and use it for cheese and cream. We treat them as wild animals, even though they're docile enough to let us milk them, and they seem to maintain their numbers on their own. We certainly don't want to increase the herds artificially.

“The only animals we actually raise are sheep and a few varieties of goat, and that's primarily because of the Basque contingent that came with us, and the fact that several wild sheep species were here when we arrived. But the shepherds limit their herd-size, and we benefit from the wool and cheese and meat that come from their animals. The horses and burros we found when we came are also on the small side, more like European horses than American. And the dogs and cats that were here are sturdy types with only a couple of varieties, as if they had adapted to these conditions over the generations. Some breeding between wild and 'domestic' cats, and between wolves or coyotes and dogs must have occurred, because most of the cats are bob-tails, and most of the dogs look like crosses between border collies and wolves. Both cats and dogs have double coats that are quite thick in the winter, but shed profusely in late spring. Even that gets used as stuffing for quilts, or to make felt for yurts, to augment the wool from goats and sheep. One of the reasons that the animals seem to like us so much is because of the attention and careful brushing they get when they start to shed.”

A few people had started wandering in from the fields on the pub-side of the river; others could be seen settling into the shade under trees across the river, spreading blankets and sharing baskets of food. A bit of a commotion ensued when someone noticed a group of horses and riders, and a large wheeled wagon making their way up the trail that Pen and her companions had traveled the day before. Safi, Lirit, and Theo stopped by the pub area and greeted Pen, but immediately went down the trail to greet the newcomers when they realized that Clara and Wren were among the group. Several people went along to help unload the gaily decorated wagon, festooned with flowers and a saffron-colored

sunshade. Several large *pithoi* and smaller jugs were carried into the pub kitchen and others over to the inn. As soon as everything was out of the wagon, someone took it and the horses to the stable, and the travelers joined the gathering at the pub. Milk and two young men (her sons, from the southern settlement, Bend informed the visitors) greeted everyone and then headed for the river to join the family members they had come to see.

“Just in time for a meal, as usual,” announced Book, and went to retrieve chairs for Clara, Safi, and Theo. Ohashi brought in bread, cheese, and fruit, and then went back for a large pot of tea. Bend packed small plates and mugs onto a tray and brought them over to a large rectangular table. Safi stood on the table for a moment, pulled out a small tool, and cut a bunch of grapes from the ramada overhead. Then, Lirit and Wren took the grapes and plates of bread and cheese over to the river’s edge, and sat under a small willow. The adults all settled around the food and drink, and resumed their conversation.

Jack was curious about the contents of the large jars, and asked Bend what was in them. “Olives in the *pithoi*,” he said. “The smaller jugs hold preserved lemons and some of the spices—like cinnamon—that can only be grown in the region around the citrus plantations. The olives will be pressed and some of them cured during the harvest; some of the olives and lemon preserves will be taken north as soon as the lavender is cut, and those who carry it all up in the wagon will bring back the late figs and early apples from the northern orchards, along with any other goodies folks want to send us. While each settlement is essentially self-sufficient, we do enjoy sharing some of the special items we produce—especially those related to particular ethnic traditions. We share almost everything, but some folks are reluctant to part with family recipes, so they send us the results rather than the information. One of the bread artisans in the south has unsuccessfully been trying to replicate the sour-dough starter the Basques to the north are famous for, so he reluctantly waits for a new batch twice a year. The preserved lemons are also made from a

secret recipe known only to an old Moroccan who lives in the south, but they're so well-loved all over the valley that he makes batches of them to share with us. I hope he's teaching his children how to make them so that the recipe's not lost when he dies."

"Well," laughed Pen, "perhaps there's a bit of competition in utopia after all."

Bend smiled. "It's probably not so much possessiveness or competition as keeping something back to add to its enjoyment. We try to appreciate everything we have, and are somewhat wary of becoming complacent about our rather abundant life. When a few things are a bit more difficult to come by, it reminds us that what we have is hard-earned; rather like sex, in a way—since we don't want to litter the valley with thousands of babies, we're very careful about what leads to making them. Consequently, no one takes sex for granted, and we tend to enjoy it when we can, and don't become jaded by over-exposure."

This made Jack chortle. "I have noticed," he laughed, "that you must really enjoy becoming naked, also, because everyone here wears so many clothes!"

"There is certainly some truth to that," Safi replied with a chuckle. "We cover up nearly everything, because we want to avoid damage by the sun. We tend to look like Bedouins, or other desert people, at least until the sun goes down—but then we usually bed down early as well, except during festivals and parties. So our bodies are usually shared only with our partners, and nobody wears skimpy clothes, even when we swim. Part of this is because our clothing is comfortable and practical, but I also think that those of us who came here were unhappy with the use of sex as a commodity in the old place. Women exposed their bodies to attract men, and women's bodies were used to sell products. Men's bodies were used that way, too, of course, but mostly it was women's. Very young girls and boys copied the behavior of older people, and that led to all sorts of consequences. Sex is much more subtle here; not repressed or

hidden, but quieter—not so flamboyant.” She glanced at Theo, who winked at her, and everyone laughed.

Pen sipped thoughtfully at her glass of cold tea, and munched on her bread. She sat quietly, watching everyone eating heartily, but not stuffing themselves, enjoying conversation without being boisterous or without anyone’s dominating the discussion, and sharing the entire experience with the children, who had rejoined them after finishing their grapes. The group formed a tableau of reasonableness; no two faces were the same color, no one was truly fat or overly thin—although a wide range of body types were represented—and everyone looked fit. Hair color and texture varied widely, but only two basic hair “styles” prevailed: pulled back into a plait or pony tail, or cropped short. Gender differences did not determine hair or clothing style, but nobody looked particularly androgynous, especially since all the men—to one extent or another—were bearded. Everything seemed somehow fair and equitable; nobody “had” more than anyone else, but individual personalities stood out, and nothing seemed dull or uniform.

“I have a question,” Pen announced, coming out of her reverie. “What do you talk about when you don’t have to be explaining everything about yourselves to a couple of strangers who don’t have the back story?”

“Everything,” said Safi. “And nothing. Now, for example, we would be catching up on the latest news from the south, sharing gossip, discussing any discoveries about crops or weather; we’d be very interested in what the children were up to, since they’re often the innovators and experimenters. Frequently groups of us meet to discuss old books, new works that have been circulating, or ideas that get rediscovered or that suddenly seem very relevant. The philosophers get together on a regular basis to discuss various texts. Or we talk about the future: what our children might get up to—and we include them in on our speculations. Seldom do we have formal ‘political’ meetings, like the one we’re going to have to have about you and Jack, but occasionally

something will arise that has possible consequences to more than a few people and requires discussion on a community-wide scale. Sometimes we just talk about fishing. Or just sit around breathing together.”

“Mmmm. Breathing,” said Pen. “I guess I hadn’t realized until now just what a joy breathing is around here: clean, fresh, aspen-scented air. It would be a Yogi’s paradise, this place where breathing in and out alone could inspire meditation!”

“Well,” said Wren, with a giggle, “until the wind starts blowing and kicks up the sand and dust. Then you might want to breathe not so deeply.”

Bend agreed, but pointed to another significant change. “By the time we left the old valley, a thin film of water lay over a good portion of the big dry lake, because they were trying to mitigate all the pollution caused by air-borne heavy metals. Waterfowl had started returning, but in nowhere near the numbers we see now, with seasonal influxes of every kind of bird along the western flyways. And the increased amount of green cover has lessened the impact of the wind. The granite dust from the alluvium still blows about, because this is still high desert, but there’s considerable less of it than there once was.”

“I *have* noticed a lot of birds,” said Jack. “This morning I saw a cormorant diving in the river, and a great blue heron in the big marsh just to the north, and there are all manner of blackbirds and songbirds everywhere. And I seem to remember seeing a condor when I came out of the canyon, before I blacked out.”

“It may well have been,” replied Book. “They range primarily on the other side of the Western ridge, but occasionally they drift over here; we spotted dozens of them on our trips over to the big central valley. Raptors in general are plentiful, probably because the small varmint population is high as a result of all the greenery. Even the mammalian predators seem to leave our sheep and other

animals alone because there is plenty of game. This is another bonus added to the way we live; we don't over-graze, we don't over-kill, we try to keep things in as natural a state as possible, and the few domesticated animals we do raise tend not to be hunted by desperate birds of prey or coyotes. It's not particularly pleasant to see a hawk make off with a baby duck or a chipmunk, but it would be harder to see a kitten or a baby chick raised from an egg snatched up. I guess we're still sentimental about our pets, even though we're also more realistic about the possibilities."

Lirit and Wren had fallen asleep in Theo's and Safi's arms, so they excused themselves. "Siesta time," Safi noted, and yawned to everyone's amusement.

"Wren's been up since before dawn," said Clara. "I'm not surprised that she's extra-sleepy. We made good time coming up, but she didn't nap, so she's probably out for a couple of hours. I could use a bit of a doze myself."

"We probably all could," Bend added, and several people began to clear away dishes and cups. Bend motioned to Clara and Pen to follow him, and Book suggested that Jack join her and Ohashi, so everyone gradually drifted off in different directions.

Clara and Bend walked arm-in-arm back to the inn, with Pen trailing behind them. Once Clara was settled in her room, Bend and Pen sat on Adirondack chairs under a large cottonwood tree, looking southward toward the river, which glistened in the early afternoon sunlight. The intense light bleached the landscape into muted shades of brown, green, rose, and lavender. The shadows under the tree provided a sharp contrast, and a light breeze rustled the leaves.

After a few moments, Pen broke the silence. "We're going to have to leave, aren't we? There doesn't seem to be a way for us—me, at least—to stay, without chancing discovery of the entryway. And if we could figure out how to use the trigger, someone else certainly could."

Bend replied, “At the moment, I’m inclined to think that you’re correct. Jack wants to go back, anyway, but someone might think he had done away with you or something if he returned alone. But we’ll discuss this at the mote this evening, and see if anyone can come up with suggestions.” Then he looked at Pen thoughtfully. “So you’re won over, and would like to stay?”

Pen rose from her chair, and walked to the shade line. As she looked out over the valley, she answered, “I’ve been busy remembering, and understanding my appreciation of what you have built here. This is my native ground. My ancestors mined silver just over there.” She pointed to one of the springs down the path, and continued “And my great-grandmother spent her whole life trying to get back here. I never really knew her, because she was lost during a hiking trip when I was very young, and nobody ever found her. But her daughter (my grandmother) and my mother were both so attached to this valley that they bought a small house in the hills near where Clara lives, and our family used it as a getaway. My mother used to hike the mountain trails once a year—a different one every time, depending on the season—and I always thought she was looking for her grandmother. But she may just have been carrying on a family tradition of getting to know the mountains and the valley as well as one could—of appreciating the gift of the place. But it’s nothing like this in my ‘now.’ It’s parched, and broken down. The towns along the main road are almost deserted, and few of the ‘natives’—or even the reservations of the real natives—are left.

“I came back to work on my dissertation at the observatory, and to stay near my mother and grandmother who spend most of their time in the valley now. But it’s a wrenching experience, to travel from the east and come into the valley from the south. The big cities are bigger and paved over more than ever, but that’s where the people are. Nobody can find work in a place like this, except in the tourist trade, but even that is dwindling as the ski resorts and parks themselves dry up. It hasn’t rained in the valley in nearly a decade; the glaciers

melted long ago. But this”—she swept her hands around the panoramic view—
“*this* is what it must have looked like when my ancestors first settled here,
before the turn of the twentieth century. I’m not sure how I can go back to the
way it was, except to rejoin my family and watch the valley die.”

