



The Brown Times

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It's Friday night, baby, and I'm home again. And again. Night after night. Months piling up. Social occasions counted on two hands. Ten visits with friends. Outdoors. Masked. In our own corrals. It's stripped down season. Life whittled to the core. Heartwood exposed. My days, measured in steps.

Yesterday I walked. Today I walk. Tomorrow I will walk. Nearby urban canyons and the streets in between. Again. And again. Finding a rhythm. In March, April, and May my canyons are wide awake and dotted with color. Bright green. Dull green. Sage green. Feathery grey green. Felted blue green. Big dark-centered yellow daisies of California sunflower. Red and mustard monkey flowers. Butter-yellow tree tobacco tubes perfect for hummingbird bills. Bunches of tiny scented purple and white Ceanothus blooms surrounded by bees. Stacked whorls of sage's white and pale lavender petals. Spring: time of mating and nesting. New life. Birds are out and about calling loudly even if they're hiding in the shrub. Giving me hope.

By late June, I'm thirsty for the face-to-face. The canyon plants, too, are feeling the parch. Dried up flowers are making seed and leaves of the softer stemmed plants wither and drop. Sage leaves curl, harden and fade into olive drab. Some Ceanothus leaves flash yellow before they brown and fall. Other leaves, tough and coated against the drought, hang on. Dry season in the canyons. I know leaves will come sprouting back as soon as the rain comes. Probably so will we. But when will it come? And what if *when* is really *if*? I keep walking.

Then it's late July and brown has taken over both landscape and heartscape. Weeks and weeks passing brown and longing for green. Thinking in phrases, now. Hunkering down. Still, I walk.

Brown soil. Brown plants. Brown birds. Brown tracks on the trails. Brown, my mornings. Brown at noon. Brown at night. Fire season begins and even the skies turn brown. Brown, dull and drab, colors my conversations. Even books take on a brownish hue. Meals brown, too. Still, I walk.

Then, one day, a slight shift as I pass a clump of dried brown buckwheat flowers stemmed above rusty needle leaves. I stop and take a real look at the buckwheat instead of shrugging it off. I see black purple brown that tops rusty brown above a pink brown tucked into the bottom of the roasted blooms. I keep looking. Khakis and tans, grey and golden, in the dried grass. Warm orange brown in the dusty sandstone soil under my feet. Smooth red mahogany bark of manzanita branches. Sharp elbows of dark brown

twigs. So many colors in the browns.

Early morning: A chance sighting: a desert cottontail racing away. Its black-edged, rosy-brown translucent ears lit up by the low light. Feathered color de cafe brown, hints of golden brown and a rump patch of rust on the hopping towhees. And that shade of brown in the bedrock in the trail? I'm out of words for this explosion of browns.

Looking it up, I uncover a litany for worshipping this color: sienna, bronze, peat, puce. Sepia, caramel, camel, coyote. Smokey topaz, fulvous, fulvous? Tawny, ruddy, fallow, fawn, wenge. Mined from the soils of Tuscany: umber—just feel that word on your tongue—burnt umber, raw umber. And the liquid browns: chai, coffee, and chocolate. My searches take me to the Renaissance and Dutch masters. Caravaggio and Rembrandt and Van Dyck—they knew and they worshipped the browns.

Oh, browns rooted in earth and soil, browns of growth and decay, browns of burnished luster and mud. Golden browns, decomposing browns. Browns of flight. Watery browns. Browns of smoke and smog. Peach browns of sunset. Show me the golden glimmer of your eyes. Wrap me in your scratchy warmth, lay your velvets and silks against my heart, pour your browns to quench my thirst. Carry me through these dry times. These deadly times. These decaying times. These times of fear. Gather close browns, in beauty and ugliness. In darkness and light. Comfort me, oh, browns, while we wait for the rains.

