

A Tilted Ground: a sestina for my mother-in-law Carol on her 90th birthday

--Nicholas Jones. September 2014

In Berkeley, it's not hard to know the ground,
to figure out which way is east or west;
even without a map, your angle on the slope
tells you which way to turn: towards the bay,
you roll gently down that inclined plane -- but when
you head to eastward, you have to climb those hills.

And you, Carol, you lived among these hills;
you felt how suddenly Marin left level ground
and made you climb with aching lungs: and when,
at evening, you watched the sun set in the west,
you saw the ferries cross the glowing bay,
like water striders seen from that high slope.

And on your bike, cascading down that slope,
you coasted Spruce or Euclid from those hills --
down past the campus, and further, to the bay,
to where the city dissipates its ground
in marsh and dune -- you'd gone as far to west
as you could go on solid ground. And when

you looked back up to Cragmont, thinking "when
will I ever get back home?" -- dreading that steep slope,
then you knew: "I love this city in the west,
the pungent eucalyptus, golden hills,
the jasmine-scented paths, the fertile ground,
the live oaks' shady framing of the bay."

Life led you east-- but I know that light-filled bay
shimmered in your chilly eastern dreams; and when
Chicago's bitter ice-storms froze the ground,
you thought of Berkeley, that city on a slope,
and maybe longed for those cradling, radiant hills,
that place of memory, far in the west.

Time circles round: you moved once more -- the west
is your home now, and Bruce's -- above the bay,
his ashes mingled now with those golden hills.
And here we come, to celebrate, now when
we find ourselves again perched on a western slope --
on this dry golden soil, this fertile ground.

This western edge is where you lived at first, and when
you came again to know this bay, this slope,
you loved these hills again, this tilted ground.