

## Sudden oak death in essays and poetry

Sudden oak death has been written about scientifically but also metaphorically, appearing in poems, fiction, children's literature and other mediums. The aspects of sudden oak death that are shared in fiction, often express the emotional and social aspects of the disease. Here we share a few interpretations, examples of how sudden oak death has influenced culture.

**Sudden Oak Death by Allison Field Bell.** Featured in Epiphany, A literary journal. Feb 2, 2022.  
<https://epiphanyzine.com/features/sudden-oak-death-by-allison-field-bell>.

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The tree was a source of pleasure for the children. It was their tree, their oak tree. It gave them oxygen, they told their parents. And acorns to throw at one another (Careful careful, you'll hurt each other). It supplied the branch for their tire swing. The parents appreciated the tree for its shade in the summertime. It lorded over their backyard lawn where they had set a table and chairs, and the father would, some evenings, smoke a cigar. He enjoyed the shadows of the oak tree. His oak tree. The way the moon cast light through its branches. Oak tree shadows. The mother, for her part, did not appreciate the debris of the oak tree. The tree was careless with what it dropped from its branches. She paid the children pennies to pick acorns from the grass.

Each year the tree stood through winter storms. With the high winds, the mother worried the tree would fall, but the father assured everyone that the tree was steady. The tree had been there longer than any of them and would outlast them no question. Small branches would often fall, and the children would gather them up into piles of sticks. One December, a large branch split and broke across the lawn. The father had to use a chainsaw to cut through its length, and the children watched in awe from the back porch. The fresh cut orange center. The heartwood. The tree branch eventually became firewood. The mother, of course, raked the debris after the excitement had subsided.

One spring, the tree—their oak tree—developed a strange rash. This is what the children announced. A rash, a rash. The mother and father examined the tree. Cankers, the father decided. Sores, the mother announced. The tree was oozing from the wounds on its bark. The mother and father shrugged at the children's worry. We need a tree doctor, the children declared. No such thing, the father said. We can't afford that, the mother explained.

Many of the leaves at the crown of their oak tree grew pale and then brown and fell to the ground. Their tree was sick, the children worried. The oak tree needs medicine, the children decided. Each child had a way of helping the tree: one child buried pills from the medicine cabinet at its base; the other child rubbed calamine lotion onto its trunk. The mother began to worry about the house. The tree was clearly sick, and it was large enough that, were it to fall, it would cause damage to the roof and structure. The mother also worried over the tree itself. Despite its debris, she had grown to love the tree for being simply what it was: present, alive.

When the arborist was called, the news was bleak: sudden oak death was the diagnosis. Sudden Oak Death. The children cried at the word death—their oak tree! The mother sighed. The tree would have to be removed, and the operation would be expensive. The tire swing, the shade, the oak tree moon shadows. Their oak tree, their oak tree. The decision to remove or not remove was not a decision. It was fact, the arborist said. But the father argued with the arborist. The father said, trees recover. If we leave it, it will live, you'll see. The arborist explained sudden oak death, the presence of *P. ramorum*, the inevitability of the death of the tree. The father was stubborn. The mother urged him to reconsider, but he refused to remove the tree.

When the tree did fall, it fell hard. It crashed through the roof and into the house. It took out the china cabinet where the mother had kept the precious china from her mother. Irreplaceable. Pieces of china scattered between oak debris. In the moment of the falling, it was impossible to know if anyone was safe. The children, the mother, the father. Anyone could have been standing at the kitchen sink, washing dishes, washing hands. In the moment of falling, the mother, the father, the children did not know the falling was happening. In the moment of falling, the tree became something else entirely, an unknown unknown. The tree, in the moment of falling, was suspended between falling and not falling. The tree was in the house and outside the house. The tree became the house. The tree became not tree. Not their tree, not their oak tree.

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### **Sudden Oak Death Syndrome by Ruth Thompson**

<https://www.ruththompson.net/category/poems-about-ecology/>

Down the long body of California,  
ramalina drapes the dead shoulders of oaks  
with her bent hair.

Lace lichen. It's the color of sadness,  
of rain that goes on for a long time,  
of things fading into the distance.

Behind its veil ooze black  
cankers of *phytophthora ramorum*.

We are in plague time now,  
these dead too many to bury, shrouded  
in lace the color of smog, fallen

like kindling over the stucco-colored hills,  
behind dry lakebeds  
where are tattooed the lost shapes of reeds.

Here I name them, the old friends:  
live oak, scrub oak, white oak, black oak,  
coffeeberry, huckleberry, buckeye, bay laurel,  
rhododendron, manzanita, madrone, sequoia.

In the fires, even their roots will burn.

We leave our children a place with no eyelids.  
They will die thirsty,  
telling stories of our green shade.

**OFFERINGS by Deborah Miranda**

<https://www.poemoftheweek.com/deborahamiranda>

At dawn the songs begin again as if never sung before,  
as if the jet stream has not wandered from its path,

the Arctic ice shelf does not melt at accelerated rates,  
Sudden Oak Death does not leapfrog across the continent;

Shenandoah Valley songbirds lean into the indigo air  
as if two thousand snow geese did not fall from the sky

in Idaho, ten thousand sea lions are not washing up dead  
in the Channel Islands, train tanker cars full of chemicals

never crashed into the Kanawah River in West Virginia.  
As if California's Central Valley agriculture is not pumping

twenty-thousand-year-old water out of ancient aquifers  
that cannot be refilled. These song warriors pitch morning

as if the territorial prayers of robins keep bee colony collapse

disorder at bay, as if crows stitch each torn morning together

with their black beaks, mockingbirds know the secret  
combination of notes that command God's ear, the low coo

of mourning doves weaves feathery medicine; they persist  
as if pine warblers, flash of gold in treetops, coax the sun

up by degrees, as if these musical beings don't know the word  
*extinction*, as if, knowing it, their silvered melodies insist

like the yellow warbler: *sweet-sweet-sweet; little-more-sweet.*

-from [\*Altar For Broken Things\*](#) (BKMK Press 2020), selected by Spring 2022 Guest Editor, CMarie Fuhrman

An enrolled member of the Ohlone-Costanoan Esselen Nation of California, poet [Deborah Miranda](#) was born in Los Angeles to an Esselen/Chumash father and a mother of French ancestry. She grew up in Washington State, earning a BS in teaching moderate special-needs children from Wheelock College in 1983 and an MA and PhD in English from the University of Washington. Miranda's collections of poetry include *Raised by Humans* (2015); *Indian Cartography: Poems* (1999), winner of the Diane Decorah Memorial First Book Award from the Native Writers' Circle of the Americas; and *The Zen of La Llorona* (2005), nominated for a Lambda Literary Award. Miranda also received the 2000 Writer of the Year Award for Poetry from the Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers. Her mixed-genre collection *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir* (2013) won a Gold Medal from the Independent Publisher's Association and the PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Literary Award, and was shortlisted for the William Saroyan Award.

### **If Oprah Were an Oak Tree** by Greg Sarris

June 29, 2022, Bay Nature, <https://baynature.org/article/if-oprah-were-an-oak-tree/>  
Excerpted from *Becoming Story: A Journey among Seasons, Places, Trees, and Ancestors* (2022) by Greg Sarris. Heyday Books, 2022.

I am learning about "sudden oak death." Specifically, I am learning to see it outside my window: I understand the crimson-colored bleeding canker on the trunk of the magnificent three-hundred-year-old live oak in the middle of my garden indicates lethal infection, presages the tree's imminent death.

My first thoughts are selfish: I will have to cut down the tree. That is, I will have to pay someone to cut down the tree, otherwise risk an enormous corpse crashing atop my kitchen. Below my yard, bordering my neighbor's property, a live oak, equal in size and splendor to this one, died

last summer, costing nearly two thousand dollars to cut down. I shared the cost with my neighbor. I will have to foot this bill alone.

Then there is the aesthetic concern, also selfish, I suppose. My home, whose modern architecture was crafted around these Sonoma Mountain ancients, which were expected to outlive the home's residents, if not the house itself, will look completely different without them.

The home's rectangular structure, meant to look integrated with the forested landscape, will appear instead an obtrusive brown box of metal and glass plunked against a naked hillside. The native ferns and grasses, dependent on the tree's shade and acidity, will give way to nonnative species, including, for example, the oatgrass and numerous varieties of thistle that commonly flourish on the dry, open hillside here.

All of the live oaks around my home—indeed in the entire region—show signs of infection, if only foliar lesions, the first, and omnipresent, indication of the disease's presence. In any given stand of infected live oaks the mortality rate is presently 40 to 80 percent. Will I have two trees left? One?

The history of sudden oak death (SOD), and the scientific community's frustration with it, not to mention the ongoing devastation, sounds a lot like the AIDS story.

In May 1997, Marin County homeowners noticed live oaks beginning to die in their gardens. Two years earlier, in April 1995, the UC Cooperative Extension office in Marin had been asked to investigate an unusual dieback of more than a dozen tanoaks bordering a creek, and in June "a shocking number" of dead trees, described by Pavel Svihra in his case study of SOD, was noted on the slope above the creek and along the crest of the hill. The dying live oaks, reported in 1997, showed symptoms similar to those of these tanoaks, and scientists suspected the same causes—prolonged drought from 1990 to 1992 followed by very wet years in 1993 and 1994, which might have reduced the trees' vigor, making them susceptible to infestations of various fungi and bark beetles, none of which normally kill healthy trees.

In June 1998, the word "epidemic" was used—live oaks, tanoaks, and now black oaks were dying from Mill Valley to Novato. By 1999 tens of thousands of trees in Marin and Sonoma Counties were infected. By the year 2000, when David Rizzo, a UC professor, isolated the pathogen now believed to be the primary causal agent of SOD—a heretofore unknown fungus of the *Phytophthora* genus, termed a year later *Phytophthora ramorum*—the disease was present in twelve California counties, most notably in Marin, Santa Cruz, and Sonoma. Today it is found in an additional thirteen species from ten plant families that act as hosts—redwoods and rhododendrons among them. So far, the disease appears fatal only to the three oak species—live oaks, tanoaks, black oaks. Yet as Pavel Svihra notes, "There are no measures available that will alter the underlying disease [*P. ramorum*]."

My Coast Miwok ancestors depended on oak trees. Acorns were for us, and for all central California tribes, what rice has been for China and wheat for Europe. For ages, acorns fed some of the densest pre-contact populations in the New World. Acorns from live oaks proved the most difficult to harvest and store, and yielded a meal, or mush, that was greasy, though good for making bread.

Tanoaks provided the acorns of choice. Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo located inland traded with those on the coast for access to the trees. The tanoaks have been the hardest hit by SOD, with 90 percent of the stands in many areas decimated. The moist coastal climate, which the tanoaks prefer, affords, unfortunately, the best condition for the reproduction of the pathogen *P. ramorum* and its spread to the trees, which our northwestern neighbors, the Kashaya Pomo, simply called *cisq qhale*, beautiful tree.

My home sits less than a quarter mile from the site of the Alaguali village. Friends' ancestors come from Alaguali. (My ancestors hail from nearby Petaluma and Bodega Bay.) I imagine these ancestors, women with tattooed chins, men sporting seal bone nose plugs and finely chipped abalone pendant earrings, raking with hand-crafted wooden instruments the old leaves and worm-infested acorns from under the tree outside my window, halting the spread of worm and other parasite infections that would tax the health of this wondrous individual. With obsidian-bladed knives they cut suckers around the tree's base and on its gnarled trunk. Every five to ten years they set fire to the area, burning undergrowth that would sap nutrients from the soil, and at the same time replenishing the ground with ash, which the tree desperately needs and depends on. That was about two hundred years ago, when the tree was one hundred.

Then the Europeans—the tree witnessed the first Spanish livestock, herds of curly-horned cattle and spotted horses that roamed into these hills from the mission plantation in Sonoma and from as far away as the mission in San Rafael. These animals carried foreign seed in their dung: oatgrass, mustard, and thistle replaced pepper grass and showy clover on the sunny slope beyond the tree's canopy. And the padres imposed—and were insistent upon—a ban against controlled burning, as they wanted the grass for their livestock, and at the same time they also ordered a ban against bathing. Did the dense clusters of pinprick leaves register a pneumonic cough, perhaps feel the heat of a human's death—presaging fever?

General Vallejo and his army of Mexican soldiers who secularized the missions and established the extensive ranchos intensified the simultaneous destruction of Coast Miwok lifeways and the aboriginal landscape. Among other disruptive acts, the American settler named William Bihler bombed with dynamite the southern end of Tolay Lake, a sacred place for the Coast Miwok, draining the lake of water, rendering a dried lakebed suitable for planting wheat and corn. Certainly the earth trembled with the blasts. Blasts, blasts, blasts . . . This tree outside my window felt all of them, shuddered, with dynamite and gun blasts alike, dynamite imploding entire hills, blasting enormous crater-like holes in the mountain, gun blasts dropping the last elk, pronghorn, grizzly bear and black bear; shovels, then drills, digging into the earth for water; thudding tractors, more dynamite, carving up the mountainside, flattening ridges for roads,

then paving the roads; oh, and lest I forget, no doubt an enormous steel crane, an unearthly monster, driving piles into the ground for the foundation of this house!

I marvel at the history I imagine recorded in the tree's life. I think of a young couple taken from Alaguali, my friends' ancestors, baptized by the Spanish padres as Isidro and Isidra. Did they miss the tree? Enslaved at the San Rafael mission, did Isidro and Isidra look up one late autumn afternoon, him tending cattle, her ironing the padres' vestments, and wonder if there was anyone still who might rake the leaves and wormy acorns from under the tree? Did the tree miss their songs, and the click and the sh in the words of their conversations? Does it understand Spanish or English? This tree and its ancestors for ten thousand years heard only Coast Miwok and Pomo languages from humans. Forget ten thousand years, think time immemorial for my people.

Once Indians on foot came up and down this spirit- and oak-filled mountain, and now I, an Indian tribal chairman, come up and down the mountain at least once a day in a car (never mind that it's a Prius), along with a couple hundred other people, all of them up and down the mountain in their cars too. This heady notion of history I glean from the tree's point of view—a lofty vision of time—distracts me from my baser preoccupations with money and aesthetics regarding the tree's impending demise. Even as I implicate myself—my home, my driving up and down the mountain—as part of a story that hasn't related a necessarily pleasant experience for the tree, I congratulate myself for knowing as much. . . that is, until I recall what a short chapter of the tree's history I have a sense of.

Time immemorial? The oak trees, along with their bay laurel neighbors, have been here forty million years.

Is there any chance the tree will survive? Can we find a cure? Could Oprah help?

Better yet, what if Oprah were an oak tree? The oak tree outside my window, for instance.

I remember being startled by screaming—cheering?—coming from the TV set. It was Oprah, or rather, her audience. Oprah was giving each of her perfectly coifed, perfectly thirtysomething guests one of her “favorite things.” In this case it was a kitchen utensil. What, a blender? A juicer? As if she had spent a lot of time in her local appliance store, or even her kitchen, testing such things.

Okay, I admit it. I was watching Oprah. At one o'clock in the morning, after a long day of writing, teaching, and overseeing the daily operations of my tribe, I turned on the TV, mostly to see the news, but flicking the channels, I found, or landed on, Oprah, a repeat from a 4:00 p.m. broadcast a decade ago. She still fascinates us. Why is everyone hooked on Oprah?

We care about her “favorite things”—foods, clothes, vacation spots, furniture, kitchen appliances, books, cars, celebrities, you name it. We care about what her interior designer can tell us about chintz and color schemes, and what her makeup artist can tell us about lip gloss and face creams. We care what her psychologist says about our problems. Did we know we had

such problems? And of course we care about what her favorite poet, Maya Angelou, says about our souls. We care about Oprah. Who doesn't know the story of the poor girl from Mississippi who became the most powerful woman in show business? Doesn't her story prove that all of us can overcome personal obstacles? We care about her weight issues. We care about her daily life. Have you called the number where you can listen to "private conversations" between her and her best friend Gayle? Oprah's social and political causes become our own. Have you donated to Oprah's Angel Network? Her heroes become our heroes. For example, the young girl (on the repeat show two nights ago), who saved her mother from a bear attack in her living room, and the fireman in Hawaii who saved a girl after her car had plunged into the ocean and was five feet underwater. Real life stuff, fantastic or ordinary, we watch it on Oprah. And if you miss Oprah on TV, perhaps because you don't watch TV, you will see her in the supermarket. Whole Foods or Safeway, doesn't matter. Her O Magazine is prominently displayed alongside People and Star. It's always Oprah on the cover, because, as her best friend Gayle once said, "People want to see Oprah." Is it possible to not see Oprah?

I rushed to the TV to see what Oprah was giving away. Toothpaste coating my mouth, eyes frozen on the screen, I no doubt resembled a rabid animal. Too late; Oprah, happy as a lark, had already moved on and was cooking something with a special guest chef. Would each of her audience members get a frying pan? Frustrated—both for missing what it was she gave away and for caring—I flicked off the TV.

Later, I heard the tree scraping against the house. Wind; I would have to sweep leaves in the morning, a chore compulsive sorts like myself don't like to think about before bed. Then a second thought: before long there would be no leaves to sweep.

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Each weekday, Monday through Friday, promptly at 4:00 p.m. on CBS, you would see on The Live Oak Show the tree outside my window. Featured in the middle of your screen would be the oak tree, long shots, close-ups, and numerous profile shots, the camera cutting back and forth from the tree to its various guests, the vast majority human, most of whom would be talking about the tree. Of course there would be shows that featured psychics, mediums who claim to channel the spirits of the trees, who would talk on camera with the tree. As certain guests discussed the tree's physical properties, the camera would pan from the gnarled trunk, properly called a bole, as the audience would be informed, to the myriad branches and onto the curled prickly leaves. During a special fall-season show featuring acorn harvesting techniques, the camera would zoom in on hands collecting nuts off the ground and, later on the same show, provide close-ups on proper rakes and clearing techniques for clearing away from under the tree the old leaves and the wormy nuts that had been left behind during the collecting phase. That show would end with a tight low-angle shot of the pile of debris burning—a voiceover reminding us that ash is good for the tree. The programs that cause the most angst in viewers



(even as they are the programs with the highest ratings) have to do with the tree's health status. Mid-season, during a program on foliar lesions, the frame would zoom in on numerous leaf samples, and special cameras would catch microscopic cellular activity, including the presence, or not, of that life-threatening pathogen *P. ramorum*. The next season would premiere with a shot of the bleeding canker, a painful sight no one can forget—viewer discretion advised—an image that keeps viewers hooked the entire season. Will we get to see the canker again? When? Will it be worse? Better?

There would be a show about the tree's "favorite things": ash and other nutrients that enhance its ability to fight disease; methods of pruning that enhance its beauty and overall vitality, using (of course) its favorite shears, modeled after Indigenous tools that prove the least painful or disturbing to the tree; birds—chickadees during the winter months, and sapsuckers, finches, and sparrows during spring and summer, with flickers, jays, and pileated woodpeckers in the fall—all of which help control parasites harmful to the tree; acid-loving flora, ferns, and such on the ground below the tree; native grasses and bulbs beyond the tree's canopy (pepper grass, various clovers, bluedicks, and poppies that maintain the local terrain by assuring, among other things, adequate water retention); rain free of acid; air free of pollutants; stable weather patterns.

One show would be devoted entirely to scientific research on SOD. We would learn about whatever progress is being made on the disease, new discoveries about its life cycle, and methods of transmission, and there would be an Angel Network of sorts, let's call it the Oak Tree Spirit Network, that we could donate to for further research. Another show would feature the tree's cousins, its immediate live oak neighbors, as well as its distant relatives, black oaks and white oaks, the latter, interestingly enough, not killed by SOD. Tanoaks, which live farthest from the tree—rarely, if ever, on Sonoma Mountain, but west, along the coast—are also the most distantly related of its oak relatives.

A series of shows lasting an entire week would follow a team comprised of scientists, politicians, and Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo descendants as they journey up the mountain on foot to the tree. Scientists would point out copses of live oaks, noting infection rates as well as native and nonnative plant and animal species and the likely impact of climate change on the ecology of the region. Politicians would take notes, commit to more funding for research on SOD and on climate control, understanding that a warmer climate challenges the well-being not only of the ancient oaks—in particular the tree outside my window—but of all life as we know it on Sonoma Mountain. After all, climate change creates conditions for new pathogens like *P. ramorum*. The Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo descendants would repeat the ancient adage that people cannot forget the tree lest the trees forget the people, and, once the party reaches the tree, these aboriginal descendants would speak to the tree in their revitalized native languages. A fire is burned under the tree, mimicking old controlled-burning practices, as an offering to the tree, and the scientists point out that temperatures above 95 degrees

Fahrenheit kill *P. ramorum*. Finally, everyone enjoys a taste of mush or bread made from the tree's acorns. It is a cannot-miss Live Oak Show week.

On the cover of each O Magazine—that is, the oak magazine—would be a flattering picture of the tree: in spring, the tree against a landscape lush green with assorted golden poppies and purple lupine; in summer, the tree, stately, against the warm, sun-dried slopes; in fall, with Native baskets, used for harvesting, at its base, the rich designs and earth tones of the baskets complimenting the tree's colors and textures; in winter, the tree glistening wet, ferns, glistening likewise, below it.

Saturday Night Live would make fun of the oak tree, with skits imitating various memorable episodes, like the one that featured Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie talking about the seedlings they adopted. Social critics would point out that many of The Live Oak Show's sponsors were not fully politically correct in terms of fair trade and labor practices, not to mention the toll the magazine's enormous subscription rate takes on the forests in Canada and South America, and the outcry would prompt the sponsors to clean up their act, and the magazine itself would convert to being published solely on recycled paper.

Thinking critically about its popularity, the show would feature a program exploring the tree's celebrity. What makes the tree so popular? Why are we hooked on that specific tree outside my window? The most simple and obvious explanation, used by psychologists, is that the media, and specifically its ability to mass-produce images of the tree, forces us to become familiar with it. It becomes commonplace, as well known as a member of our immediate family. We see it as often as the people we live with, and, if we pay attention—that is, if we watch the television show with even a modicum of ardor or regularly read the magazine—we may know more about the history and daily life of the tree than of the people in our own households. Or at least we think we do. Other psychologists and media experts would point out the irony that the tree's celebrity is simultaneously based on, and maintained by, the fact that it is on TV, and that, in fact, we don't know it at all, or only to the extent producers and such want us to know it. Bottom line: The tree outside my window can't be likened to the tree outside your window, for then it would become truly commonplace and no longer of such intense fascination.

The irony, understood by anyone with an interest in the workings of mass media, seems symptomatic of the larger culture and history of which it is part. In an ironic yet very noticeable way, we don't know our own homes. We may occupy our homes, our neighborhoods, our bioregions, our watersheds, whatever, but we are simultaneously separated from them, not engaged with them. Thus, we are strangers where we live. We are here but not here, home but not home. At some point, all of us, Native and non-Native, developed, or perhaps accepted as a result of military defeat and colonization, a culture characterized by this condition. Aboriginal people—let's start with the Israelites—were removed from their native land, or home, and enslaved and then freed, finding themselves in a place with only a promise of land, or home, once again. This story has played itself out multiple times, replicating a pattern that has disengaged so many people from their native homes that now the vast majority of the human

population finds itself in this condition. Certainly, there are variations in the story, and different Native people cling to land-based lifestyles and traditions with varying degrees of success. But, for the most part, we have effectively become strangers where we live, at least from an aboriginal land-based point of view. We may no longer look specifically for a promised land, with or without our tribe, but the act of looking for home—call it security, if you wish—is the same. We set our gaze elsewhere. We think more money, a bigger house, more cattle, a script that will sell, whatever it may be, will get us there. Often governments and historical circumstances provide no alternatives, if they even allow us opportunity to pursue such things, but the trick—and the truth—is that as long as we remain separated from our home, not fully engaged with it, looking elsewhere, we will always be insecure. It will feel natural to see, perhaps dream, of home and security down the road, next year, in another life. It will feel natural to look at the tree on TV and not at the one outside your window. The tree on TV will be real to us. We've learned to look that way.

Could The Live Oak Show be popular because environmentalism is popular? I'd like to imagine so. But to what extent, then, does environmentalism remain an idea and not something lived? The tree's survival, not to mention our own as a species, depends on our living connectedness with the world, and most importantly with the local world, our home. The danger of seeing only the celebrity tree is not only that we don't see the tree outside our window but that we don't see our relationship to that tree, how our lives, and the decisions we make, impact its well-being. A celebrity culture—let's say any culture disengaged from its home—is in many ways a blind culture. If we don't see the tree outside our window, if we are not truly at home in our home, how can we understand our connection with it? How can we know to be responsible? This blindness, in fact, helps maintain the disconnection that maintains, in turn, the blindness—a very dark circle, a patch over our eyes.

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Looking at the tree outside my window offers vision. It suggests a history I am implicated in and inextricable from, not just in terms of my Coast Miwok ancestors but now, while the tree and I are alive in the same home. My car trips up and down the mountain contribute to poor air quality, as does anything I purchase in the grocery store or local mall that requires the burning of fossil fuels, whether strawberries from Watsonville 120 miles away or a pair of tennis shoes made in China. What I plant under the tree, or near it, the amount of water those plants require, also affect the tree's well-being, as do the types of fertilizers I use. My neighbors, too: whatever they plant, whatever livestock and pets they own, affect the tree. The Angus cattle in

the nearby hills continue to spread exotic seed. Sulfites used in the nonorganic grape vineyard down the road waft in the air and poison the groundwater.

Domestic cats—two live next door—kill birds that clean the tree of parasites. Dogs—there's an adorable yellow lab in the yard two houses down—can spread viruses that kill the native blue fox, the predator so necessary for the containment of squirrel populations. Too many squirrels deplete the tree of acorns. Never mind that without acorns the tree won't be able to produce seedlings—what if one day I needed those acorns for food?

This tree engages me with my world. Vision and connection. It's still giving, the ancient oak. I sense irony in this, and something at once sad and beautiful too, and urgent.

This morning I went out to rake leaves. The tree these days is dropping quite a few of them. The mid-April sun was warm. The gentle slopes in the distance were bright with buttercups and purple lupine. But, alas, when I turned back to the tree, bamboo rake in hand, there was the large gnarled trunk, the bleeding canker at its center, startlingly crimson in the light. I wanted to turn away, move to the other side of the tree where the canker wasn't visible. Oh, where were those yellow and purple hills? But too late. I'd seen what I'd seen. I felt depressed. My thoughts over the last few days appeared banal, plain stupid, particularly the notion of Oprah as this tree. Stupid metaphor. But this tree—the ugly canker—was important, wasn't it? Couldn't I find a more meaningful way to write about it? It was, after all, talking to all of us; it was our canary in a coal mine. Then the tree made me laugh out loud. Silly English professor, with your metaphors and meanings, good God. Canary in a coal mine? Why not the tree in front of me?

### **About the Author**

***Greg Sarris** is an award-winning author and tribal leader serving his 15th consecutive term as chairman of the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria. He received his PhD from Stanford University and has taught as a professor of creative writing and American and American Indian literatures. His books include *Becoming Story: A Journey among Seasons, Places, Trees, and Ancestors*; *How a Mountain Was Made*; and *Grand Avenue*, which was adapted into an HBO miniseries. Visit his website at [Greg-Sarris.com](http://Greg-Sarris.com).*