KEY TO THE CITY

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Walking the streets of Los Angeles, wandering determined, puts me more intimately in touch with the map than driving ever could. It makes plain where my identity shifts in the city, reveals the infinite ways to read and reread place.

I was born in this city and raised in Baldwin Hills since midway through second grade, after the family spent a six-and-a-half-year interval in Durham, North Carolina. I went from racing turtles and hiking in woods lit by fireflies to banana-seat biking the Dons — as all of Baldwin Hills's street names begin — where many Black TV, film, and music stars lived long before the recent influx of white residents. I was not walking the neighborhood streets until after a family friend's 18-year-old kid tried to rape me when I was 13 and babysitting his kid sister. A month or so afterward, he died doing a motorcycle trick in front of his house, which was the scene of the crime. I then walked past to see how I would feel — and if the street itself might describe the terror of him crawling through the window, grabbing his sister, and locking her in her room, and then dragging me into his. I wondered if I would feel proud of how hard I fought for the hour and got away, or if because he was now dead it might feel like it never happened. There was blood on the street. I was shocked to see the stain and wondered how many days of rain it would take to wash away the evidence of his existence.

I cannot remember the first time I walked a labyrinth, but it has been my way of washing clean for decades. On a really good day, walking a labyrinth can feel like wearing a decoder ring and doing tactical magic to solve the riddle of being human. It can open the appointed realms, summon future memory, encourage emotions to well up, move through, and out into the ground. When doing too many of them in too short a span of time, it may also feel like turning in place on varied spots of the map.

On Sundays, when I was a kid, we went to my Panamanian maternal grandmother's house in the West Adams district where we ate her most delicious black-eyed peas in coconut milk rice, stewed chicken, and fried plantains. I danced all day and evening with my many cousins — most of us now working in various fields of the arts — and any number of us would walk together to the liquor store for sweets and anything else our mothers, drunk on

champagne, wanted. I was friends with my grandmother's neighbor Googie, who sometimes sat on the porch next door scratching his father's dandruff and combing his long hair — and it was not until after becoming good friends with the writer Jervey Tervalon in the early 2000s that we discovered we had written about the same person in our respective story collections, which I happened to see shelved side-by-side at San Francisco's beloved City Lights bookstore. Once Googie and I walked to the liquor store when, all those blocks away, I suddenly needed to pee, and though we had just bought a bag of goods from the store owner, he refused a seven-year-old's request for the bathroom. In shock, I stood right there at the counter and pissed on the floor. It was a perfect storm of rage, humiliation, and nature calling — and he was certainly sorry. This was my first marked awareness of racial discrimination.

When we got back to Googie's — I was too embarrassed to face my grandmother, mother, aunts, and uncles — he had to sneak me into their bathroom. His mother was a nurse who had a side business of putting up white women recovering from facelift surgery who did not want to be "seen by anyone," as Googie put it. This only added to the day's indignity, as all of us on my grandmother's street could see the women arriving and leaving: were we not people too? But the Adams district was all Black then, and the Santa Monica Freeway was built in the 1960s to run right through "Sugar Hill," as it was called in the '30s, to destroy it.

My grandmother was a housekeeper for a family in Bel Air, where I was also bussed from Baldwin Hills to an elementary school on Bellagio Road that no longer exists. The bus was privately arranged by my father and a group of other influential Black businessmen in cooperation with the actor Burt Lancaster and other Bel Air proponents of integration. During that first bus ride up the Bellagio Road hill, people threw rocks at the windows, but after a week they must have gotten used to seeing the little school bus of what could not have been more than 25 Black kids. The city took over the bussing program a year later, after it proved a success. I spent many lunch periods wandering the perimeter of the campus and dreaming upward at the creatures running through the hills.

My education continued on the Westside: Emerson Middle School, which is directly behind the intimidating gold mountain of the Mormon Temple on Santa Monica Boulevard, where all of us at school were warned never to trespass, particularly the skaters, with whom I sometimes hung out. I was then bussed a little farther west to University High, when drivers ed was still on campus, and during my sole lesson on Sunset Boulevard, approaching the downhill winder just past the 405 freeway at what would become my alma mater, UCLA, I pressed the brakes, but my teacher slammed his foot on the accelerator and shouted, "*Go!*" From the age of 16 I have driven the city streets like this — with an offense-as-defense race car assertion, even with the maddening increase of phones, of Lyft and Uber drivers who may not know the city. I am still weaving through to make

that green light or the freer faster lane on the freeway.

Freshman year at UCLA, I lived on Hilgard Avenue in the Christian Science dorm and was kicked out a month before the end of the school year for having my boyfriend in my room with the door closed, rather than ajar, so that in privacy we could argue over whether I should go home with him to Carmel for the entire summer. When the residents of the Women's House — all of them white girls whose parents had voted for Reagan and found my way of dressing "loud" — had voted me out for this official reason, my parents, knowing exactly what this was actually about, did not say a word when they picked me up and drove me home to commute for the remaining month.

Before the sophomore year began, the only apartment building whose manager did not run out in a panic to tell me the Vacancy sign was supposed to have been taken down, was on frat row, Gayley Avenue, so I moved in. I do not believe I ever saw another Black person on my daily walks to campus. And at the start of junior year, I was in a Veteran Avenue apartment across from the cemetery — I also walked its perimeter — for two days until my two white roommates, to whom I had only spoken on the phone, arrived, were shocked to see my skin color, and promptly told me this would not work out. All of this occurred in the '80s.

My current favorite labyrinth is in the Tuna Canyon Park Trail — you take Old Topanga Canyon Road, climb Fernwood Pacific Drive, and keep climbing to Tuna Canyon, then turn down Las Flores, past a small horse ranch, and park somewhere between 10 cars at most. At the gate, you head left and climb the hill, walk past an overlook bench, and keep going. If you choose a gray day, the labyrinth will sparkle on the cliff under watery sun, the clouds beneath your feet, and the maze of glittering rocks appears to float above a phantom coast.

When I lived in Led Zeppelin's party house in Laurel Canyon for 13 years (after Sycamore and Beverly; Saint Andrews in Koreatown; Fountain and Spaulding in West Hollywood; and after a horrible discrimination case, a house on Redondo near Washington Boulevard with the settlement money; then seven years in New York, first in the Village, then Williamsburg, then SoHo), I made my own labyrinth in the backyard woods, which I walked every morning, making peace with the day.

When living in Bangkok, before making it back to L.A. in time for the 2020 lockdown, my favorite walk was in a nearby Chinese cemetery, where there is a river, many temples, a boxing gym, squares for dancing, *qigong*, and lanes for running amid the archipelagos of tombstones, making death, beauty, and life one.

Today, I signed the lease and got the keys to a cottage in Jefferson Park, after a month of couch surfing in the homes of loved ones in the Adams district, Silver Lake, Canoga Park, and Mar Vista. This month, finally over, was the first time in all these decades of my life that I could be described as unhoused. In these pandemic years, observing my native L.A., I sometimes saw only a city coldly sold to

the highest bidder, a city that was never about stone fruit and cinema but was a site of 241 years of ruthlessness.

But that is when I would head to a labyrinth. I now have a map of many, thanks to a visit last fall to the Annenberg Community Beach House. They had a weekend labyrinth in the sand, built by designer Lars Howlett, and the kind attendant, seeing my mirth as I walked, ran up to give me the key to the city.