

# “Go West, Young Brown Girl”

Lillian-Yvonne Bertram, 2012

In 1865 Horace Greeley said “Go west, young man...go west and grow up with the country.”

My mother never went west. No one ever said “Go west, young brown girl, and grow with the country.”

“Aren’t you frightened,” my mother asked, “traveling like that, alone?”

Maybe.

I made sure to carry bear spray and to time my footsteps just in case of snakes.

When I tell my mother that it’s much smaller and more distant looking than I ever would have

Thought, she asks if the park brochure mentions that Jefferson enslaved people.

As I went walking that ribbon of highway, and saw above me, that endless skyway, and saw below

Me that golden valley, this land was made for you and me.

Sometimes, when I feel people looking hard at me, as if they know something about where I belong

That even I don’t know, I don’t know why, but my face gets hot and I imagine that it’s turning red.

To go west and grow with the country, must have sounded like a kind of permission, a kind of freedom.

But I’m still wondering for who.



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