

decomposed granite

Last week I bought a pallet of decomposed granite. It arrived on a big truck and was unloaded on my lawn alongside another pallet of large thick paver stones. In the midst of the pandemic, I'm improving my yard. Expanding my life into outside spaces, trying to afford some breathing room, an illusion of greater freedom. The material is like red crumbly dirt and is wrapped in a gigantic plastic bag. The pallet weighs multiple tons. It is sinking into the lawn.

Yesterday I plunged my hands into the bag of red granite and my my mind was sent instantly into the past, to California, to a distinct memory.

It was probably 1991. It was the summer and Nirvana was singing "Smells Like Teen Spirit." My father had been laid off from his job, so he and my mother decided to sell the house. And in that peculiar way when you own a house for years and suddenly choose to sell, you begin in earnest to fix all the sundry things that could get in the way of a clean sale. You paint. You re-carpet. You replace the roof. You wonder aloud: why didn't I do this earlier, so I could enjoy it?

My father did all of these things. And then he focused on a drainage problem in the backyard. This "yard" was all concrete, abutting a vertiginous hill, the foot of a Californian mountain. It was really a glorified patio, anchored by a large, fiesta-orange Jacuzzi. The overflow for the hot tub was managed by a series of drains embedded in the concrete, but they hadn't worked properly in years, maybe ever. This wasn't much a problem in Los Angeles: I have zero distinct memories of it ever raining. But my father was a perfectionist and obsessed.

He poured obscene amounts of copper sulfate into these drains to fight what was probably root invasion, to no avail. He used a router. He tried a drill. He tested the situation again and again with a hose, ultimately employing a submersible pump to siphon off the standing water. Still clogged.

The whole web of drains in the patio appeared to interconnect in a nexus deep underneath the Jacuzzi. This was a massive tub, set in orange tiles, buried into the patio. No way to lift it up. No way to get thru the concrete. But alongside the tub was a skinny bed of soil with plants and a 40 foot cypress tree (the probable cause of the root invasion). My father traced the drains with his eyes and he formulated a point of entry. If he tunneled down thru the bed he could come up under the Jacuzzi. But he would

have to dig. By hand. And he would have to dig through the material of the mountain that the house was built upon: decomposed granite.

This was an absurd task, painstakingly slow. Father dug by hand, with a hammer and chisel, breaking off the soft rock and scooping it out in small piles. He had to lay flat. I still feel guilty thinking on how little I helped. I hope I helped more than I remember, but I fear it was minimal. I was working a 5am shift at a temp job for IBM in Burbank and each day was up at 4:30. But I do have a foggy memory of laying on my stomach in the tunnel, deep under the Jacuzzi with a flashlight. It was like a closed-end MRI—terribly claustrophobic. I was sprawled on my back with the hammer and chisel, thinking my father is nuts, but also admiring his monomaniacal drive. Every man needs his white whale. Father found his under a flaming orange hot tub.

It was a hot summer. Dry Santa Ana winds bending the cypresses at crazy angles. It was especially hot in the tunnel that my father was carving, inch by inch.

The fact is my memories are blurred. The fact is my memory tends to come back in shards. I don't know how much is spot on, how much is a dream, a story I wove or pieces I stitched together to fill the gaps. But I do know that yesterday, at the moment I pushed my hand into the giant bag of decomposed granite, I felt a memory sting me in a flash. I saw my father's skinny legs protruding from the tunnel, pushing a small pile of crumbly red rocks out from under his body. I saw him digging. And I remember thinking this will go on forever.
