Instructions for Traveling West
by Joy Sullivan


- J. Sullivan

I didn’t write for nearly 8 years. Well, to be fair, I did write email campaigns and landing pages and flashy paragraphs called brand narratives which read like bad poems but occasionally still made my clients cry. I worked hard and got promotions and always felt a little impressive when I ordered Manhattans on the company card.

But the truth is I began to develop chronic pain in my hands from 60+ hour work weeks. I got so accustomed to stress that I couldn’t turn off the hum of it—even in sleep. I wrote so much for other people, I forgot my own language. My soft edges began to curl in like conch shells, even though I hadn’t seen the ocean in years.

Somewhere in the middle of the pandemic, I started driving west. The instinct was as startling as it was insatiable. I lapped up skylines like honey after famine. Then came six weeks of climbing mountains, avoiding clients and swallowing as much sunshine as I could.

One morning in the middle of Arizona, I sat down with my laptop. A desert hummingbird—its whole body, the shape of a shining comma, hovered out the kitchen window. I told myself to write, really write—for myself. No clients. No strategic messaging. No keywords or SEO.

Just the truth of my life trembling on the page.

That morning, I wrote myself a poem called Instructions for Traveling West. I wrote it as imperative, as incantation.

I wrote my life so I could find the courage to live it. [...]
You can read the full back story of this poem in Joy Sullivan’s post here.