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Susan Straight's most recent novels are *A Million Nightingales* and *Highwire Moon*.

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## The Golden State, The Hummer and Hydra-Headed Budget

The Golden State. Seventh-largest economy in the world. The place where everyone has always wanted to come, for the weather, the scenery, the optimism, the money. I still meet them - I met one last month, a woman born in a small seaside town in England who lives in Tahoe now and extolled to me the virtues of her new state.

I'm a native. She couldn't believe it when I told her. Rare in many places, but not rare at all in Riverside, where I live three blocks from the hospital where I was born. And that must be why it hurts so very deeply, to we who are natives, that our elected officials and our own compatriots are pillaging us. They're wrecking our state, like plump-cheeked wind gods flying around on government-painted ceilings blowing our money into some rarefied atmosphere where we can't even see it anymore. And endlessly, they claim that it's the fault of The Budget, it represented as if it were a mythical multi-headed monster which they bravely try to tame each year, and which they claim to have tamed tonight, as we natives look on in horror.

Governor Schwarzenegger said tonight, "It was like a suspense movie, but we have accomplished a lot. This is a budget that will have no tax increases, a budget that is cutting spending."

He's happy to have cut billions of dollars from healthcare, education, and corrections, among numerous other areas. And he, along with many legislators who are probably not natives, and who seem blithely unconcerned, are wrecking the foundation of this golden state and what it has meant for generations.

Being a native in our part of southern California often means this: I was born in a public hospital, went to public schools, and then attended city college. I married a man who was born in the same hospital, who went to the same schools, and who now works for the county. Our three daughters were born in those public hospitals, and attend those public schools. For the past 21 years, I have taught at a public university. All Golden State. All the time. My neighbors? Most of them second and third generation Californians, natives of Riverside, Oakland, San Bernardino, Los Angeles, and Perris.

Most of us list these same public institutions as part of our history, and none of those institutions can work as smoothly as they did when we were younger, and my own three children were younger. All of these institutions are now in grave danger, here in the state where we knew how to do things.

None of our three children expresses a desire to stay here, in this former paradise. Earlier this summer, as the budget debacle stretched on and one, that made me sad. But then, as I turned in my grades, watched my kids finish their own essays and tests, and talked to my ex-husband, who works graveyard shift at a correctional institution, it made me angry.

We couldn't put off for months our own work. We couldn't blame budgets and co-workers and the economy for our own inaction. Certainly I had to grade each of my students' papers on time, and my ex-husband couldn't stop watching the secure inmates of his juvenile institution, some of whom are accused of murder. Why, then, have our governor and legislators spent all this time grandstanding, blaming each other, and not getting their jobs done? And why did it take them until tonight, while we lost money, while we all took pay cuts and furloughs and saw state and county offices shuttered?

This agreed-upon budget makes deep, serious cuts in nearly every public institution of the golden state. And already, these institutions are in serious trouble.

Billions cut to home healthcare workers, and to healthcare in general. Public hospitals are closing, are overcrowded, are unable to offer emergency services, are being replaced by boutique hospitals and clinics. People die in emergency rooms, people received delayed treatment for illnesses, and overworked staffs of doctors and nurses try to keep everything together with less and less money, amid fluttering pink slips.

Four billion cut in education! Public schools in many districts are overcrowded, out of supplies, laying off teachers, laying off principals, unable to complete

needed repairs, unable to buy new textbooks, despite years of what we were told would be amazing benefits of lottery money. One neighbor, a native, who received pink slips the past two years, teaches in Adult Education. The Budget has dictated that many Adult Education centers close for summer and cease offering GED classes, just when more people need to learn basic skills or get a GED because of layoffs and cuts in that same Budget. And recently, several local school districts have cut bus service, even to children in rural areas who now must walk or find their own transportation to school if they live within four miles. These are elementary school kids, and that's like the stories of the rural past in America - when children walked for hours to one-room schools.

For the past few years, our governor and legislature enjoy protracted battles about The Budget and make weekly threats to each other over extended sessions, where I'm assuming they take lots of lunch and dinner breaks. And for the past few years, every spring, teachers across the state get pink slips, just before tax time. My neighbors, friends, and fellow church-members talk constantly about these pink slips, about how stressful their lives are knowing that they could be laid off, about how even if most teachers aren't laid off, the threat hangs over everything, including their own students, who of course know this is happening.

Often, people from elsewhere say to me that Californians have been living excessively. Some have. But me? Same house for twenty-two years, same car for thirteen. On my block, true for most people. And when I express frustration with schools, some people who are not natives will say, "Why don't you just put your kids in private school? Or better yet, move?"

Wait, what? That's the solution? Let's just have a two-tiered system, where public schools cease to function and no one cares because it's not their kid? Nope. Your private school kid may fall in love with a public school kid, and undoubtedly, will depend on someone educated, or not, in a public school, whether as financial advisor, Fed ex person, fisherman, friend or foe.

Public city colleges have raised fees, and yet also have overcrowded classrooms, trimmed course schedules, and are unable to offer some classes. And our world-rekknowned public university system, The University of California, where I have proudly taught for two decades, is in trouble as well, raising fees every year, cutting staff, slashing library budgets, and not filling vacant teaching positions. Last week, the UC system proposed furloughs which will cut pay from 4-10%. I'm not sure what percentage I'm looking at yet, but I'll know soon. Just when my own kids' college bills are due. And many of our best, brightest students will choose to leave the state, along with many of our most talented professors.

Where is all the money going?

This year, after voters rejected the propositions that were supposed to "save" our budget, and our state, the governor was interviewed countless times. On national public radio, he kept talking about belt-tightening. He said that Californians were being asked to sell their second cars and motorcycles, to have garage sales, and that the legislature would have to respond with deep cuts and belt tightening, on The Budget.

Immediately, four areas were mentioned for "belt tightening" and further cuts: Education, Police and Fire Departments, and Prisons.

I didn't hear anyone talking about congressional aides, administrative positions, the special boards our governor has continues to appoint with people who receive salaries of over \$100,000 who attend maybe four meetings a year, with travel included. Cars, meals, perks, spokespeople - I've noticed at least six different names as spokespersons, every time the Governor speaks.

1.2 billion cut to state prisons! My ex-husband, after eighteen years, will take early retirement in two weeks from his county correctional job, as he's been asked repeatedly to do because of The Budget. Those two words. Not Golden State. The Budget, as if it were a living breathing thing with fur and heads that grow again even as the governor and legislature face it down each year with swords and stern faces and cut, cut, cut those heads until the right one is rolling off to the woods somewhere, so they can go back to doing whatever they seem have ample money to do.

I met Maria Shriver once years ago, just after her husband became governor. We were at a benefit reading for foster children. She was very nice. She has four kids. We talked about our kids for a minute.

Do they go to public school? She said a few words about her husband to me. My ex-husband, after he "retires" in two weeks with little pay and no health benefits, is going to look for work as a truck-driver.

I saw Arnold Schwarzenegger's second house once years ago, when I did a workshop for local people in Sun Valley, Idaho. We ate at a restaurant where people told me that Arnold and Maria came frequently, with their four kids, four nannies, two drivers, and various other staff people.

"They take up that whole table," the waitress said.

Today I saw an old Humvee. The original one, from years ago, which resembles a flat-backed duck or boat. I remembered suddenly that Arnold Schwarzenegger was the first non-military American citizen who got permission to own a former military vehicle. He was the prototype driver for today's H3. The smaller, slicker Hummer.

Hmmm.

It seems to us, natives and normal working people, that everything is very wrong, and that no one seems to care. We often joke that our governor, who has another home in Idaho, could move after his tenure is over. We don't want to move. None of us -- the thousands of people who were born here, whose families are here, who cannot imagine living anywhere else, who cannot afford to move because we need each other even more right now, when the money is flying around on some ceilings and the governor is smoking cigars and laughing in his Jacuzzi and thundering that he did not compromise, while the hydra-like Budget that rules us, lunging and snapping at the dollars, is said to be agreed upon -- tonight. California has become the source of jokes and laughter about our governance -- it is still home to us.

We aren't going anywhere, but we think a lot of elected officials might be moving. Some time soon.