

Long Way from What

Poems of California, June, 2013

For Sarah, Tanya, and Jill—ideal travel depends on fair footsteps.

Part One: Composed Then

I wanted to capture everything as my health was taking everything.

The sun shot out like a branded echo.

The sun shot out over Outer Sunset.

My camera as my fingers the tips numb and alarming

Their resulting images blurred from shaky wrists

Even the lines here retyped again and again

The tablet unsteady like a gun in my talons

Camera long since collapsed retired returned to

Crush of sun the Golden Gate bathing in beauty I

Am crushed by a sun even a tsunami here would be gorgeous.

Gorgeous confrontation of death the transcendentalists
Were right being smothered by the extreme edges of canvas
Painting the reality as complex as singular pixel I
Stroke my fire the digital self
One Buddhist one separate
By nothing but that beautiful orange transference

I coo to the spew of orange you would speak of
Sarah I truly unspool my length of vision little feelers
Seeking each sight out timely and delighted

Guerneville challenge spinning back and forth main drag a pendulum

We cannot find the bar beneath the pleasant late night oddities

Bear culture I see a rainbow Stoli neon sign and hear house music

We are a long way from what, exactly?

Why is it that it feels so comfortable?

My leg groans in slight and strange pain

Little tricks of numbness licking toe tips

It's never certain how to act, master

Ground down to mentee within an open doorway

Staring out toward whatever new space now accessible.

And Sarah cried like a crying angel.

And Sarah cried like a crying bird.

There were words that were left unsaid.

We all know you from different spaces, I thought,

And we all love you.

Meanwhile a crying bird sits hungry in its nest. The best use of a fruit container I have ever seen. Sage leaf pillow. Yarn blankets, the chick is motherless, fatherless, featherless. Two dull black wings protrude like tools from the side of a venous torso. I am happy for you right now though I know you will definitely die. You are blind only know unknown. In a sea of confusion you know nothing and we are the same. And you must be so hungry, for life and comfort. Your mother. Your siblings. From which tree did you fall?

Jill captured you from the sidewalk next to a street in San Francisco. You could have been eaten by ants. Swarmed and devoured is not a way for a cute, squeaking creature to go, we all agree.

I'm not sure ascending from life by way of eight human hands offering you little bits of fried tofu leftover from the expensive Korean fusion restaurant is not the way to go with either. We are your mother right now. Though all we can do is prepare to witness death, all we can do can help make your last hours the happiest hours, phantasmagoria of belly rubs, humbling hands.

As I write this she, the strange anonymous youth, is potentially lifeless in the dark of the bathroom of this new age cabin in Rio Nido (which means Bird something) on Eagle Nest Road. And I am afraid to go in. I need Jill and Tanya and Sarah and myself. I want to investigate together. I would hope my own potential death would be investigated and uncovered by a group as well, though I feel that idealistic.

Part Two: Composed Now

It all starts with leaving one thing for another.

Museums of ancient games play tricks with my coins.

The illusionist is a series of clanks and cranks:

clouds within the mind only.

Would you prefer mechanical laughs, cries,
a dead Native American face-up between two bison?

And there is the scariest Santa I've ever seen,
crazed as a crack head in his manic toy carpentry.

And there are opium addicts carefully Asian,
and the black people they carved into demons.
And there is turn of some century pornography.

And there is this mystery:

“WARNING! BY MODERN STANDARDS /

THIS DOES NOT SOUND LIKE MUSIC. /

(This machine only).”

Off in the corner a dusty machine reads “Oil Fields” at its head and contains no human figures.

It is as lifeless as one could ever hope for, as one could ever hope to ignore.

I feel chills in my bones until Joe wins too many gumballs and we leave the building chewing.

Later my tooth would crack and break—the only wound I received in California.

Some machines we fed. Others we left alone.

Outside a man plays endlessly rocking the decades-gone hits on his keyboard.

I feel more synthesized than the grinding metal of the streetcars.

Each streetcar is paramount but not pragmatic.

Each beautiful, though crammed with the meat and stupidity of tourists.

Sitting next to Minnesota twins, over and over I think:

How can I make them silent?

Lose yourself bruising the true You.

We get home, and Sarah and Joe are intricate caretakers.

I find their kindness undeniably precious.

I find my damaged leg shamelessly okay.

Sit up thinking of sobriety, energy, vacation.

Sit up thinking of a city that feels like a vacuum.

Sit up thinking of the previous evening with the poets.

MFA students are rushing around everywhere before being taken over perhaps trained and tossed into the corners by the elite dancing community of something close to Tenderloin though I won't later know I was close to this sinkhole hood show until being told as such.

The Cat Club or just “Cat Club” is a smoking place where the only people smoking those around me with marijuana in their teeth and the cigarettes are developed and turned by older people one wouldn’t think should or shouldn’t be in the space my mind spinning as a cog my leg growing and pulsing in the evening the beer long since guzzled the fumes of pot wrapping around me tendrils of the night the Buddha statue comically placed in the corner most remote section of the room and the old woman with her fake ice cube emitting rainbow light goes over and only smokes by the Buddha antagonist the woman hates explaining herself well get out of here then I think just leave but she doesn’t she goes back and forth the rhythm maniacal making everyone curiously frustrated ready to explode and yet the 80s dance night lets out its ring and everyone behaves themselves until it’s time to go time to leave time to part ways with hugs so many faces I know none remember I think Katie who was tall and brilliant and there were two guys too who humored me reminded me of impractical thought from being an undergrad they were kind though, welcoming the way poets should be when young and lacking any reasonable experience.

We ate.

Chinatown shut down.

The hill must have felt like hell

on your shit ankle,

Sarah.

Sturgeon

amidst greasy noodles.

The owner nearby like a gargoyle

sharp eyes honing.

Tender.

Pregnancy.

You saw the women.

Their bellies hooks, daggers.

The blades so sharp they

Puncture.

Faster, and forward:

Tanya sits Driver Seat

Slice of Fog Roll'd Once Now In

Take Us to Presidio

Jump through Hoops of Air

We perched upon stream bank
Moon gone when sun grappled by cloud
Humboldt's Red-Bodied Snails
"Pacific Sideband" the site reads
Jill, when you and I held our cameras
Name became "Anomalous Beauty"

Where we wear our blades of grass fresh stalks of whimsy talk
this bath of sage shall keep us at stage through peace this eve
struck fat match lit to let smoke absorb to skin and move
apart that soulful individual opinion: we are a group
we have given each other a fullness, a gravity,
and now we await to hear our voices loud strike and carry.

Castro.

Mission.

BART.

Airport.

Long walks.

Friendly faces.

Hesitancy.

Dolores, you stare at me
through the men
of the city
through the gawkers
and their hunches
my hunch is abandoned
and then let on:
perch atop tree stump
eat vegan donut.

Glass Beach prongs
lapping at songs of
our uncollected memory,
the 20th Century dead to post-Gen-X-ers
and we watch the dead of the white
unforgettable the rusted trash
while we slurp thick, wet noodles.

Confusion Hill spills
upon the breath of calm driving.
The road to merge one with 101
ends here.

Seers by chainsaw
and the endless panda bear stare.

We are off roaming grounds
and no one is around.

Petaluma Luminescence

You've found the lock for the key

Bulbous and every ride seems broken tonight

Is this a masquerade?

Can games be played in the cold?

I trust you've made the same walk as I
and since you suggested these directions
we must now understand the slants of pavement
the Castro shouting back behind me
Dolores Park humanized through sunlight.

I wanted to write the rest, write it all, but I lost strength.

Instead I took my hands off the filthy keyboard
and remembered waking up to a slow progression of rain taps
hitting the fabric like fingers and light was next to us like a blanket.

There are moments never to be forgotten.

These are moments where our bodies are one with language.

written by greg bem

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